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RED-SKIN'S PLEDGE.

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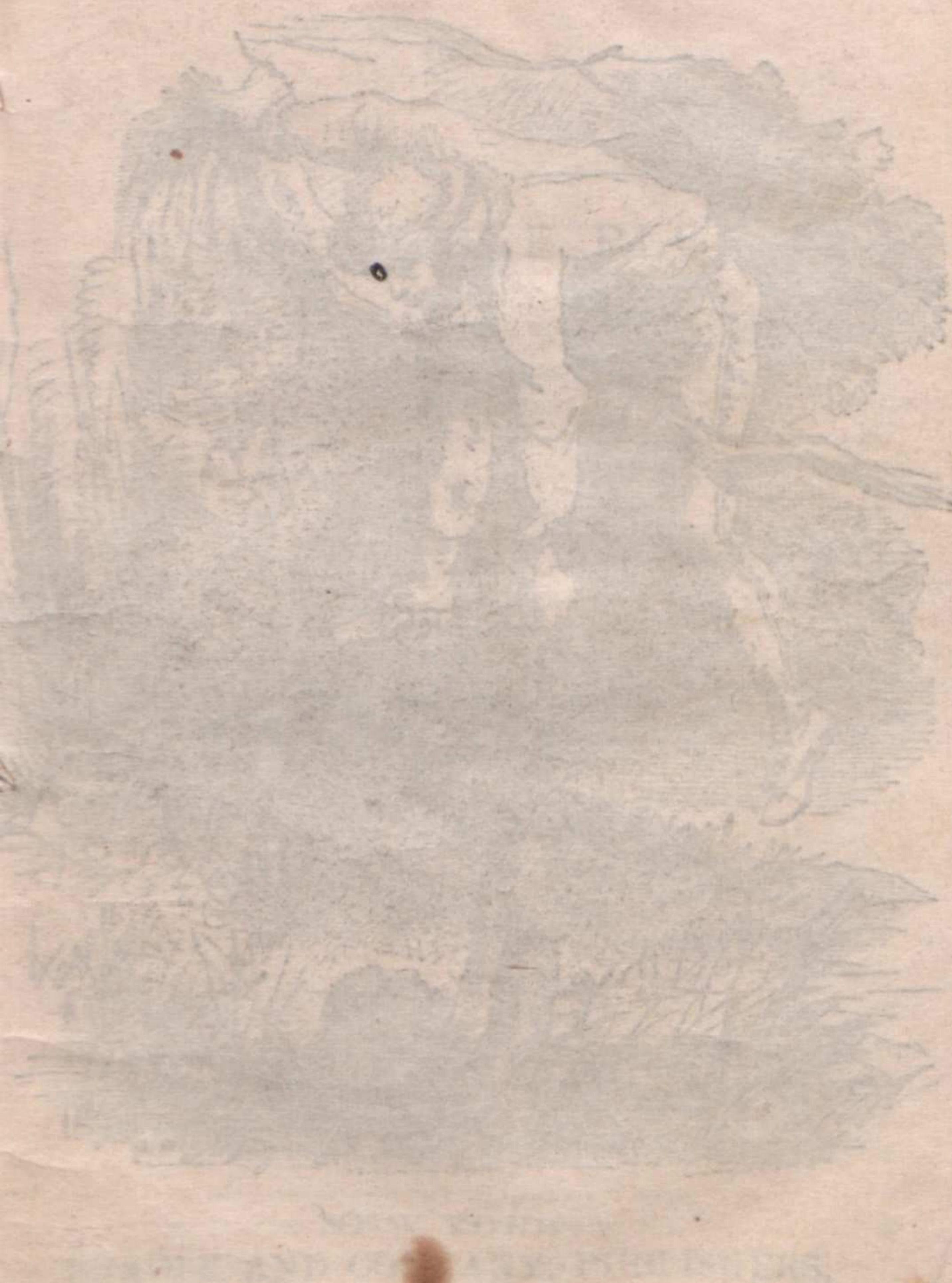
"And dost thou suppose I will spare this vessel for *thy* pleading?—for thee, thou wretched, miserable woman, who left me so long ago, to run off with a hound of an infidel?"

"Father, my husband is aboard this craft. Ah, have pity on him—have mercy!"

"Mercy!" interrupted the moor, with a savage howl; "mercy! Ho! ho! and is it thou who canst speak of that? No, no, girl, thou shalt die with thy husband and all the rest: for thou hast deserted the faith of thy fathers—of the great Mahomet—to marry a Christian dog!"

So saying, he lifted the torch to hurl it into the magazine, when Inez again sprung forward, and, with the strength of desperation, endeavored to hold his arms.

Henry the Justice





THE RED-SKIN'S PLEDGE;

OR,

THE DOUBLE PLOT.

BY JAMES L. BOWEN,

Author of the following Dime Novels:

97. <i>THE DOOMED HUNTER.</i>	117. <i>THE MOHEGAN MAIDEN.</i>
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(No. 166.)

THE

RED-SKIN'S PLEDGE.

CHAPTER I.

THE RIVALS IN THE FOREST.

AWAY upon the frontier, where the primeval forests still towered aloft in their grand magnificence, and the settlements, few and of feeble appearance, worked their way slowly into the wilderness, as the grand outposts of a busy world, a single human being was plodding his way through the mazes of the unbroken woods.

Despite his rough garb, something in the man's appearance stamped him as superior in mind and manners to the ordinary class of hunters and border-men. He was short of stature, scarcely standing five feet and seven inches in his moccasins. Yet what was wanting in height found a compensation in the roundness of limb, and liteness of movement which indicated the man of strength and action—a trusty friend, but a dangerous antagonist. His years could not have been more than two or three and twenty. A dark-brown mustache overspread his upper lip, giving manly beauty to his features, and energy to his expressive face.

In addition to the long rifle which rested upon his shoulder, a knife and pair of pistols were partially revealed at his belt. By his side, slightly in advance, trotted his only companion, a large, wiry dog, of the hound species—an honest, demure-looking beast, yet whose eyes and ears ever were on the alert.

Proof that "Prince" possessed the requisite sagacity, was not wanting. As his master walked forward with eyes upon the ground, half oblivious of all passing about him, the animal uttered a quick growl; then, with eyes to the front, he trotted on again, intent on some object in advance.

In the distance a person was discernible, seated upon a

rock beside the path, his feet dangling a few inches from the ground, and a heavy rifle resting across his knees. As the young woodman approached, the man raised his eyes and gave voice to a surly grumble.

"Good-day, Dan," the young man exclaimed, pausing within a pace of the other. "How are you?"

"Don't know but I'm wal anuff," was the answer. "Should s'pose ye might see as much as that; what's the use of askin' so many questions when ye happen tew meet a feller? What odds does't make to you *how I be?*"

In age the surly speaker must have been over thirty; in stature he was six feet three inches in his stockings, lean, slab-sided, and possessed of a vast degree of physical strength. Dan Rawlins, or the "Cub," as he had come to be designated by his friends, the border-men, had been for years the professed bully of the settlements around. Drunken brawls and fights were his pastimes, in which none could excel hin. Few men in the section could shoot closer to the bull's-eye than he, and none could annihilate prowling savages more rapidly. A naturally sour and morose disposition had been encouraged by the misplaced adulations of his followers till Dan really had become the dread and tyrant of all the region about.

Still, he was the hero of a majority of the settlers, rude, almost lawless men, who feared his great strength and the reckless applications of it, till they almost forgot that there might be right beyond the strongest exhibition of might. Thus, Dan's recklessness and lawlessness increased until the more peaceably disposed had come to regard him with actual horror.

Before this man, Mark Morton paused, in his walk through the woods. Dan evidently seemed disposed to force a quarrel with him. But Mark was not in the least disconcerted; he understood the characteristics of the man too well to exhibit the least alarm or annoyance.

"Oh, I see what's the matter, Dan; you've wandered off here to have a fit of the sulks all by yourself! Am I right?" he laughed, watching the effect of his words closely, meanwhile.

"Wal, s'posin' I have or hain't; whose bizness is it?" was the rejoinder.

"Oh, nobody's business, of course. I hold that a fellow has a right to do just what he thinks best, so long as it doesn't interfere with anybody else."

"Oh, you do, eh? Wal, that's jest about what I think, with this difference, that Dan is Dan, and you are jest Mark Morton and no more."

"That *is* all; though, for the matter of it, one man is as good as another, provided he behaves as well."

"Wal, may be, and may not be. But I can tell ye jest one thing; sure as tow-fire, the man that meddles with Dan's bizness gits himself intew a scrape. Do ye understand that?"

"I calculate I do; though I don't see how it has any thing to do with me."

"You don't, hey! Wal, I'll jest let ye know what it means to *you*. Whar was ye goin' when ye come along here and stopped to ask questions?"

"I was going through to Fort Jackson."

"Oh, you was! On bizness, eh?"

"Partly on business."

This unexpected turn in the conversation somewhat disconcerted the young man, and he was a little uneasy, despite his efforts at calmness. The fact did not escape the evil eyes of Dan Rawlins.

"Partly on bizness, hey! Wal, partly on what else?"

"You are inclined to be very inquisitive. I don't understand the especial interest you seem to take in my affairs but I can tell you all I've got to tell in a very few words."

The reply was given in a careless manner, which seemed to say, "Don't press me too far, if you are the Cub."

"Wal, let's hear it!"

There was a mocking smile upon the bully's face, as though he already had wrung the coveted information from his victim by sheer force of terror.

"I was going over to Jackson, as I said," was the calm response, "partly to get a supply of powder and lead, and partly because I had nothing else to do, and wanted to pass away the time."

"Yis, yis. A mighty pleasant way you have of passin' yer time, no doubt. But, I want tew tell ye one thing; don't

ye never go there ag'in, acause if ye dew I'll hev tew take yer case intew my own hands."

"I do not understand you."

"Seems to me ye don't take the shortest cut to Jackson," said Rawlins, running his eye along the path in front of him.

"If not, it's because I'm in no hurry, and do not intend returning to-night."

"In course ye know whar *this yere* track leads tew."

"I ought to; I've traveled it times enough. It runs by Mr. Eaton's, and then up to Fort Jackson."

"Maybe *you* carkilate on stoppin' at Eaton's, too. Likely 'nuff thar's whar ye intend to stay over night?"

"Quite likely."

"Wal, I want tew tell yer one thing. If you go thar fur the sake o' seein' Minnie Eaton, why you'd better keep away, that's all!"

"Why so?"

"Because I tell ye tew! That gal is to be my private and ondevided property. So ye kin set yer mind at rest on *that* subject. I've had an eye on ye now for a good while, and it's time we understood one another. I tell ye tew *keep away* from thar in future, or thar'll be a ha'r-pullin', ye can depend on that."

"Just as you choose, Dan!"

"What d'ye mean by jest as I choose?"

"I mean it's of no earthly use for you to threaten me. I am not one to be driven or bullied out of my rights. The question lies with Minnie Eaton herself. If she says *you*, you are the man, and I've nothing to say. If she doesn't say so, you need not try to play the dog in the manger."

"*Do you call me a dog?*" hissed Dan between his compressed teeth. "Take *that* to remember me with!"

Simultaneously with the words he sprung to his feet, and, swinging his rifle aloft, brought it down with a force sufficient to have felled a buffalo-bull. But the blow missed the head for which it was intended.

Mark had expected a cowardly assault, and was prepared for it. Springing to one side, and throwing up his arm he warded the blow. As the weapon dropped from its owner's grasp by the the very fury of the stroke, the youth planted

his fist square between the eyes of his antagonist with such strength as to fell him to the earth.

It was several seconds before the fallen man recovered his senses sufficiently to realize his unusual plight, and when he attempted to rise he found himself pinned to the earth as by a grasp of steel.

In a moment the worsted bully became restive, and struggled furiously, desperately, to regain his feet. But it was all in vain. The antagonist whom he had almost despised on account of his smaller frame, proved to be the better man, and held him with little effort.

"Let me up!" he shouted, growing red in the face from something besides rage. "I tell you let go of my throat unless you want to die this minute!"

"Keep your temper," returned Mark, with the most provoking coolness. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Come with me to George Eaton's, and lay the whole matter before Minnie. Let her decide between us. If she gives the preference to you, I shall never think of troubling you or her any more. If not, you agree not to molest me in any manner."

"Wouldn't I laugh to see myself sneakin' round in *that* shape? No, sir; I tell you that gal is to be mine, and mine she shall be, by fair means or foul!"

"Very well. So long as you talk like that you can lie here; I guess I can hold you," and the speaker tightened his grip, as though by way of emphasis.

"Maybe I'll lie here, and maybe I won't!" the discomfited man growled. A single effort seemed to convince him that he had better be quiet, for the present.

For several minutes neither of the men moved a muscle. Dan was quietly awaiting the moment when he might take the other by surprise, and Mark as quietly awaiting the struggle which he foresaw. Suddenly the athletic bully gave a spring, and so well had he calculated his chances, that it seemed for a moment as though he would succeed in overthrowing his antagonist, and regain his feet.

For more than a minute the combatants swayed fiercely from side to side, and then they sunk upon the earth again, Dan under.

Seeing that the young man's muscle must prevail over his

greater bulk and boasted prowess, Dan relaxed his efforts to produce a pistol, and was thus borne down. He had barely time to draw it from his belt and raise the hammer, though not to discharge it, when a strong grasp was upon the barrel, and another and more dangerous struggle ensued. In this, also, the youth triumphed. During the scuffle, the weapon was discharged, without injury to either, and a few moments later it was wrenched from Dan's grasp by a quick, dextrous movement, and thrown far from the spot of struggle.

This was the opportune moment. Mark knew that if he dallied longer it must be at the risk of final defeat, only another word for his own immediate death. Grasping Dan's throat with his left hand, and resting his knee heavily upon the bully's chest, he drew and presented one of his own pistols. As he did this, he said, in low, decided tones:

"Be quiet, and listen to me. Make another such movement as the last and I will blow your brains out, as I would those of a horse-thief. Twice, like a coward, you have tried to kill me; but I'll let you up now if you'll do what I said at first. Come with me to Eaton's and let Minnie make her choice; and let that decide it forever. We'll never say anything about this little affair. Will you do it?"

There was no reply. The threatened man looked up once or twice at the cold, frowning muzzle of the pistol, and his dogged determination seemed to soften somewhat.

"You had better make up your mind," Mark urged. "I've no ill-will toward you, and if you say be civil to each other in future, and do what I proposed in regard to our love-affair, it'll be all right. Come, what do you say?"

"I 'spose I'll have to," snarled the discomfited Dan. "You've got me now, so I can't do any other way. Jest turn aside yer old pop-gun, and let me get up."

Mark rose to his feet and lowered the weapon, still holding it in readiness to meet any treachery. The giant shook himself as a great dog might have done, and then stood for a short time regarding the youth who had so completely outgeneraled and defeated him.

"Shall we go down to Eaton's?" asked Morton in a very commonplace tone.

"'Spose so," growled Rawlins. Picking up his rifle, and the pistol which had been thrown away, he indicated his readiness.

"Come on," said Mark. "I'll not have you behind me, for you might take a notion to shoot. Neither will I ask you to go ahead; the path is wide enough for us to walk beside each other, at present."

The young man laughed lightly, and the ill-assorted pair took their way, through the forest-depths, toward the cabin of George Eaton.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT THEY FOUND.

THE young man, despite his late triumph, felt far from easy; but was careful not to manifest any such feeling. Dan, sullen and revengeful, would, no doubt, seize the first opportunity for vengeance. An assault, if made, the young man could not hope to escape as he had just escaped from the evil intentions of Dan alone. The bully had plenty of ardent friends who would hesitate at nothing if it but received the sanction of "Cub Rawlins."

That Minnie Eaton would accept the addresses of Dan he had no fears. For himself he had strong hopes. What then? Nothing could wound the bully and his friends more than the double defeat. The more he reflected upon the matter, the more Mark became satisfied that neither himself nor the maiden would be safe from the violence of lawless men. Dark deeds had been imputed to his companion, to which young Morton never had given any credence; but, what could he not believe now of the desperado at his side?

From a train of thought induced by his peculiar position, he was aroused by a remark from his companion.

"I wonder what's up down to Eaton's?" was the exclamation.

They then were within a hundred rods of the dwelling, only

a narrow belt of timber hid the place from their eyes. Mark looked up quickly, though for a moment he comprehended nothing unusual.

A light wreath of smoke curled up above the trees, and the sound of human voices fell upon his ears.

"I don't see any thing out of the way," the youth remarked.

"Youngster, I tell ye thar's suthin' up—suthin' what don't make out to be all right. Hear them chaps hollerin'!"

"Yes, I do; and, as I live, I smell fire!" returned Mark, losing his self-control at the discovery. "Can it be that they have—"

"It's jest no more nor less, boy. They are burned out, as true as I'm alive. If thar's any thing happened to that gal there'll be sorry times, I kin tell ye."

The huge fellow started forward with a bound, and Mark was not a pace behind him. Dan's last remark had satisfied the youth that he really loved the maiden. It required all his exertions to keep up with him.

In a few moments the homestead broke upon their eyes. What a scene was there!

Instead of the cosy log-cabin, surrounded by a yard taste-full laid out, and inclosed by a neat fence, what did they see? Only a pile of charred, blackened ruins, from which heavy clouds of smoke still were rising. A crowd of rough, fierce-looking men were gathered about the spot, clad in every variety of costume, and displaying personalities as diversified. They were talking and gesticulating fiercely, and more than one rifle was raised as the new-comers broke abruptly upon the scene.

"What's the meanin' of this?" Dan demanded, as he reached the place, Mark echoing the question.

There was a simultaneous reply from nearly every person assembled, not a voice being distinguishable in the uncertain chorus. But an old, sun-burned settler, who stepped forward, thus explained affairs:

"It's jest what all on us wa'n't lookin' fer, sir. Ye see it's the work o' the cussed red-skins! They've burnt this house, killed Mr. Eaton and his boy, and carried off the women-folks, we 'spect—"

"What is that? Carried the women off?" demanded both of the listeners in a breath.

"We 'spect so, as I's a-sayin'. Thar's nothin' to be found on 'em. We seen the fire up to the fort, and come down, but when we'd got here the savages had gone, so we ain't any wiser."

"How d'ye know 'twas red-skins?" Dan demanded.

"Course 'twas Injins. Thar's Mister Eaton and his boy both laid near the house, with their sculps took off, and tommy-hawk-marks on 'em. Besides we knowed the critters by their tracks."

"Is that all you have done? Have none gone on the trail to recapture the women if possible?" Mark asked, in a voice of intense interest.

"Sartin, my young chap. Thar's five fellers of 'em what started off at wonst. They swore they'd bring back Minny and her aunt, or else give their sculps to the reds. Ye see, they talked it that Dan, here, fell in love with the gal, and would be down on 'em if suthin' wasn't done right away."

"That's a fact," returned the gratified bully. "Seein' things is whar they air I don't know but I'll lend 'em a lift myself. How long they been gone?"

"Not above fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Then I'm off. You jest show *me* the way they went, and I'll show *you* how Dan Rawlins can hoss down an Injin at his own game. Come on, you chap, if ye want a shake in, acause I'm goin' tew help the fellers what's gone on ahead."

"Don't think they'll need ye, Dan," spoke a sinister looking fellow, emerging from the group. "There didn't seem to be but three or four of the Injins and I reckon the boys kin take keer of 'em. Though ye kin go, if ye think best."

"Can! Wal, I reckin I can; and I reckin I will, too. Thar may be more of the pesky skunks around, and if thar's any very great fightin' to be done I want ye should make up yer minds the Cub has a shake in."

Then, repriming his rifle, he turned to his late companion.

"What say, Mark; are ye goin'?"

"Certainly I am going. You don't suppose I'd—"

"Wal, git ready and come on, then; let preachin' go till some other time," was the harsh rejoinder.

The direction taken by the Indians, as well as by those who had gone in pursuit, was indicated, and the two men at once set forth, amid the loud acclamations of the excited party about the ruins. A hundred good-wishes followed them, and as many promises of assistance if it should be needed.

To all of these demonstrations Dan replied with grunts and boastings, while Mark was too deeply moved by what had recently transpired to trust himself with words. He gazed for a moment upon the horribly-disfigured features of the murdered ones, lying there so ghastly, and then followed his gaunt companion from the place.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE FOREST.

AFTER they were well under way in the forest, Mark began to think it possible that he had not done precisely what was for the best in thus unpreparedly starting away. Still there had been but one thought in his mind—the thought that Minnie Eaton was in danger among the savages, running through his brain. Perhaps it was fortunate that he had not taken time for extended thought. If so he would have been quite dismayed at the circumstances. He had but a few charges of powder, no food, or any means of procuring any. On the other hand should Dan Rawlins go on without him, and succeed in rescuing the maiden from the savages, would she be much safer in his hands than with the red-men?

Thus one reflection followed another through his brain, and but for the fact that his fate was already fixed, he would have been quite uncertain what to do. Now he was strangely associated with his rival, and, come what might, he did not intend to retract.

The excitable circumstances seemed to have driven all thoughts of their late disagreement from the mind of Dan. His tongue ran now in a continual clatter, speaking first of

the deeds of valor by which he would teach the red-skinned rascals better than to invade a peaceable settlement again, and then running off upon some other equally imaginary theme.

"Ye see," such would be the tenor of his remarks, "if them fellers didn't hev more'n half an hour's start of us we'll overtake 'em jest the easiest kind before dark. I know the fellers, Sam Buck giv' me their names, and a right good lot of boys they be, too. There will be seven of us, and my stars! if we can't fan out more nor tew dozen red-skins, then my name ain't Dan, that's all!"

Mark, though quite silent, and speaking only when his companion turned to him for confirmation of his ideas, was really thinking much deeper than Rawlins. Whatever the perils or pains they might have to endure, he felt they would be but slight if he could in any manner assist in rescuing Minnie Eaton from a horrible captivity among the savages. Nor did he count upon the event so confidently as his companion. He realized that in many ways might their wishes be defeated, even by a much inferior body of Indians. Yet he was determined to employ all possible shrewdness and bravery, trusting the result in the hands of Providence.

In this manner they proceeded for an hour, guided by the well-defined trail which had been made by the Indians and the pursuing white men. Dan, as usual, was expatiating upon the dire vengeance which he would mete out to the red-skins, when both of them stopped short, and bent to listen.

"Didn't you hear suthin' what sounded like a gun?" Dan asked.

Mark replied in the affirmative, and the blustering fellow pursued:

"I'm tee-totally blamed if I don't think the boys have run afoul of the darned snipes!"

He was cut short by something which sounded like a war-whoop from savage throats, and the rattling discharge of several guns, so far distant that their reports barely reached the listeners' ears. There was no mistaking the sounds, however, and both grasped their weapons, with a quick glance at each other.

"They are certainly engaged," exclaimed Morton, still listening for further sounds.

Again all was still, and those less practiced in the sounds of the border might have imagined that they had been deceived.

"That's what they air," returned Dan, examining the priming of his rifle. "The boys hev found the 'tarnal sneaks and are pepperin' away at 'em. Hope the reds hain't tuk the boys at a disadvantage. Still you can't tell any thing about it. If I was only thar myself! True for ye the reds didn't yell much as if they're a runnin'."

"Come on! come on!" shouted Mark, overpowered by the dread thoughts which forced themselves upon him. "We may get there in time to help!"

"No hopes o' that; not a hooter," rejoined Dan, following his companion's rapid lead. "Whichever way it goes, the show will all be over afore we git thar, that's sartin. Still we may be in time tew hev one on our own account. Look out that yer old shewtin'-stick is all in order, acause ye may hev a slight occasion tew use it!"

Mark assured his companion that his weapons were all in perfect order, and then they darted forward without further conversation, as fast as possible, till within a short distance of the spot whence the sounds of conflict seemed to have come. Here it became necessary to proceed with greater caution. The region through which they were advancing was heavily timbered, bare of underbrush, generally, with the surface only broken by slight undulations, which prevented a wide scope of vision at any time.

A quarter of a mile away they could discern the sluggish course of a creek, which, after descending rapidly from the mountains, far away to the northward, wound its tortuous way through the forest, on to the river. In places the banks of the creek were fringed by heavy masses of bushes, and it was at once apparent that here was the place of conflict. The two men paused and drew together for council.

"It's purty sartin that 'ere is the place," said Dan, indicating the course of the creek. "Thar's all the chance in the world for the infarnals tew hide, and take a lot of fellers jest the foulest way. Likely as not they are in thar now, and hev got their evil eyes on us—who knows?"

The reflection that the watercourse might conceal an

ambuscade was far from pleasant, and for several moments neither of the men spoke. To glide from cover to cover till they should be sufficiently near to make a thorough reconnaissance, and yet never expose themselves, was far from being an easy or enviable task ; but, owing to the conformation of the land it seemed the only practicable course, and without losing time unnecessarily, they set about it.

Twenty minutes later Dan Rawlins had penetrated the bushes, crossed the creek, and ascended the opposite bank. Mark was scarcely behind him. Crouching close to the earth the two men opened the bushes cautiously, upon the further side, and peeped through.

The trail they had been pursuing crossed the stream several yards above them, and in that direction they turned their eyes.

A low exclamation of horror from Mark, a fearful oath from Dan, spoke of some dreadful sight which met their gaze.

There followed a few moments of silence, during which the men kept in their positions, and looked anxiously for any appearance of foes, but nothing appeared save the horrid vision above.

"Thar's nary a sign of any red," Dan finally whispered.

"Not as far as I can see," the young man returned.

"Then come on this way."

They stepped back into the creek, and waded up till they reached the crossing. Here they halted, and as the bushes were broken down and trampled, the whole dreadful scene lay exposed to their gaze. Stretched upon the earth, bloody and mangled, lay the ghastly remains of several white men. All had been tomahawked and stabbed, and each bore the signet stamp of savage barbarity, the scalp-lock torn away !

At a short distance lay two savages, who seemed to have fallen in the onset, and had been left by their comrades in the haste of departure.

"One-two-three-five," grunted Dan, counting the forms of the victims before them. "There they all are, my lad, every one of 'em. They've been fooled, sartin as ye live."

Mark gazed on in speechless horror. Long as he had lived upon the border, this day had opened new experiences before

him. Naturally tender-hearted, the sight of so much blood and horror might have unnerved him, had not the image of Minnie, in her dreadful peril, been ever before him. As it was he felt sick and faint, looking upon those mangled forms.

"Keep a sharp eye out for the pesky rascals," pursued Dan, as he slowly stepped from cover, holding his rifle ready cocked for instant use.

After a few quick glances around, he set to exploring the forest, in order to ascertain in which direction the savages had retreated. In a very short time he found the trail, and returned to the place where he had left Mark.

"We're all right," he sung out. "The cusses are all gone. Come out; we'll take a look at the premises, and then conclude upon suthin'."

Mark left his crouching-place among the bushes, and joined his companion, keeping his rifle ready for instant use, in case any of the savages should appear. A hurried examination of the fallen scouts showed plainly that life was utterly extinct in all, and every one had been horribly mutilated. The two Indians had been shot through the body, and one of them still breathed, but was too near his end to speak.

The corpses were ranged side by side, under cover of the bushes, the scattered weapons gathered up, and then Dan turned to his companion again. When he spoke there was a spice of the former insolent manner in his tones, but Mark scarcely noticed the fact.

"Wal, chap"—so Dan spoke—"ye kin see the eend what these chaps come tew. They's five as smart boys as the settlements afforded. So ye kin look 'em over, and make up yer mind whether ye want tew foller the red-skins any farder or not."

"Are you going any further?" the young man asked, looking his huge interlocutor in the face calmly.

"Wal, I jest reckin when Dan Rawlins backs out ye may conclude the game's up! I've fit tew many Injins tew give up so easy as this."

"Which means, I suppose, that you intend to go on."

"It don't mean any thin' else."

"Well, suit yourself as to whether you go or not," returned Mark, with more of determination upon his features than had

been shown there before. "I started to help find Minnie Eaton; and so long as I live, and there is a possible chance of getting the poor girl home again, I shall follow that chance!"

"Good for yer grit! I only hope ye won't back out by and by. The Injins hev left us a purty good trail, and all we've got to dew is to foller it."

In the haste and excitement which had accompanied his setting forth, Mark had not realized that he might supply himself with ammunition from some of those about the burnt dwelling. Now the sight of the fallen men reminded him of the fact. Plenty of powder was at hand, and of this he took a full supply. To find a bullet fitting his rifle was not so easy a task. After searching every pouch in vain, he was forced to leave his own rifle, and take another, the pouch of which was well filled with balls. Both of the men examined the weapon closely, and in all respects it seemed superior to the one he had carried.

A wallet of provisions had been left untouched by the savages, and after slinging it over his shoulder, and carefully charging the newly-acquired weapon, Mark announced himself ready for the trail.

"They've left an uncommon plain track," Dan remarked, "and I reckin if we drive ahead right smart, we'll overtake the plaguey beasts afore night, dew their best."

It was even so. The trail had evidently been made in haste, and little or no pains taken toward concealment. There seemed to be six or seven of the Indians still remaining, and in places the sharp prints of two small shoes could be seen. These, of course, belonged to the women, and as they were of different sizes it appeared that both the missing females were safe—if "safe" could be applied to persons in such a situation.

As it was not probable that a war-party, burdened with prisoners, would proceed as rapidly as their pursuers, the hearts of both the scouts were filled with the hope of soon overhauling them. This done they trusted to their own skill to devise some method for liberating the captives, and taking them back to Fort Jackson.

These pleasant anticipations were soon crushed, utterly and

cruelly. At less than five hundred feet from the place where the trail became decidedly such, the scouts came upon the tracks of horses. A brief search revealed to them the fact that nearly a dozen animals had been tied in the forest around.

Both the men rapidly surveyed the scene, and while Mark stood in blank amazement, Dan gave utterance to his feelings in language not over well chosen.

"The confounded, raskilly skunks!" he exclaimed, proceeding to invoke such a fearful and complicated doom upon the entire race of red-skins that even an inquisitor might have paused in holy horror.

"The curses!" vociferated Mark, as he finally found speech. "Here they left their horses, and stole up on foot to poor Mr. Eaton's cabin, killed him, set it on fire, took away the women as prisoners, ambushed the men who came in pursuit of them, and now, no doubt, are on a keen gallop to their own haunts. But no matter. We can follow them, if we have to go slower than they, and if the trail should be lost Prince will speedily follow it out."

"Don't place much reliance on the dorg," Dan remarked. "I never fancied 'em for huntin' Injins. Ye kin dew better alone with yer shewtin'-stick."

But "Prince" had disappeared; in fact, Mark had not thought of the dog before since leaving the ruins of Eaton's cabin, and felt sure that he had been left behind. It was strange that he had not followed, but there was no help for it now, and the very fact of his absence was rather gratifying to both men, though possibly for different reasons.

At Dan's suggestion the young man took the lead upon the trail, walking as rapidly as possible, his companion keeping close behind him. In this manner they traveled for two hours, scarcely speaking a word during that time. While there was no particular necessity for caution, there was no occasion for speech. They had no hopes now of overtaking the savages. Possibly they might come up with them, while the latter were encamped upon the way; if not, they must follow them on till the village home, to which they were probably taking their prisoners, was reached.

It was now so dark that nothing was to be seen, and the

trail was temporarily lost. After searching for it a few moments, Dan exclalmed :

"Look a here ; I've jest a notion 'at we shan't make any thin' by stavin' on in this darkness. We'll be a sight more likely tew get ontew the wrong track than keep the right one. If we once git off we shan't find it easy gittin' back ag'in. After midnight we shall hev a moon. Now, let me advise a bit. Sooner or later, we've got tew rest—that's sartin. It looks tew me the best thing we kin dew is to sleep in the darkest part of the night. So I'm goin' to bunk in ; if ye say stop till the moon rises, the best thing you kin dew is tew foller suit."

"I don't like any delay," Mark answered. "But, as you say, we can not proceed now, and may as well rest till the moon is up."

This being agreed upon, they selected a pleasant locality far enough from the trail for safety, built a small fire, for the evening was chilly, and seated themselves to such a frugal repast as their limited stores allowed. The fire had been carefully built and guarded so that its light might not betray the two men who crouched beside it.

The repast had scarcely been disposed of when there came a sudden sound, the lond hoot of an owl, not far away, startling them both. Anxiously they listened for its repetition, which came soon.

"Was that an owl, or was it a confounded Injin ?" demanded Dan.

"I'm not sure," the young man replied. "It sounded right enough ; but almost anybody can imitate an owl. What do you think ?"

"I'll be bu'st if I know," the first speaker returned. "Thar it comes ag'in. I'll tell ye what, young chap—you draw off yonder a ways, and keep shady, while I work up in that d'rection and see. We'll find out in that way."

Something in the young man's nature rather rebelled at the manner in which he was placed in waiting, like a mere child, and hasty words were at his tongue's end, but he did not speak them. Certainly it would be better to keep up the semblance of good-will existing between them, so, without any reply, he took the station allotted him.

There he remained, listening and watching. Occasionally the cries were repeated, but nothing unusual could be detected about them. At the end of an hour Dan returned.

"All right," he said cautiously. "Nothin' but an old owl up on a dead pine. There she goes ag'in."

The sounds were still repeated, and feeling no further fears, the two men rolled themselves up in the most comfortable manner possible, and were soon sleeping soundly, despite their strange surroundings and deadly mission.

CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

THE first impression of Mark, as he began to awake, was that a much greater length of time had passed since he went to sleep than he had intended. As this impression took a decided form he sprung to his feet and looked around. He remembered that it had been their intention to rise and set forth again as soon as the moon should give them sufficient light, but now he saw with dismay that it was already high in the heavens. Where was his companion? How had it happened that such a length of time had passed and neither of them had waked?

The latter question had passed rapidly through the young man's mind, but he did not pause to solve it now. He saw that his companion was gone, and judged from the appearance of the place where he had lain that he had been gone for hours. What was the meaning of all this? Suddenly a thought flashed across the young man's mind.

"By heavens!" he exclaimed, aloud, "that owl had something to do with this. Dan has played upon me—fool that I was to trust him. I had better be looking out for myself, now that I begin to have my senses."

He bent and placed his hand where he supposed his rifle to be, but his feelings may be faintly imagined at finding it gone. A hasty search assured him that it was nowhere to be found.

Here was mischief, beyond any possibility of doubt, and mischief with an object. Almost mechanically he placed his hand upon his belt. A quick motion and gasp of horror followed; that, too, was empty; his pistols and knife had been taken away by the same nocturnal robber. It is simply impossible to describe the rush of emotion which came over the young man as he completed the fearful discovery. That he was the object of a foul conspiracy there could be no question. To what would it lead? Probably not to his death, since it would have been quite as easy to kill him in his sleep as to rob him thus, and leave him still living.

"There's one thing certain," he mused, kicking the dirt idly with his foot, "here I am, empty-handed and alone. If I do any thing more I must go back and get a gun, putting my efforts back half a day more. Blame me if I don't think that is what Dan Rawlins has been figuring for--now I think I know that's it. Dan'll push on; possibly he's in league with the Indians, somehow—and make a farce of rescuing the captives. Then he will talk love, and tell lies in regard to me, till he has it all his own way. That's what he means, and blame me if I see how I'm going to cut him off."

A serious internal debate followed this soliloquy. Three courses were open to the young man. He could relinquish the attempt altogether; go back and endeavor to find weapons among the fallen beside the creek; or he could go on, unarmed as he was, and take his chances. The first he would not do, if any other chance remained. The last he dared not do, as it would be recklessly throwing away his life. The other course did not seem to promise very favorably.

But the question was to be settled, independent of his course of reasoning. While engaged in meditation, he had wandered, almost unconsciously, several rods to the right, and now stood gazing and thinking, almost unmindful of his situation. He was in the midst of an open glade, where, for some distance upon either hand, no trees were growing, save some very small saplings. The glade might have comprised two acres, and upon all sides it was surrounded by a strong growth of heavy timber.

While studying upon his unpleasant situation, thinking how best to remedy the loss he had sustained, Mark stood gazing

at a large, gnarled oak, some rods distant. Suddenly he fancied that a human head appeared from behind the trunk. True, the apparition was but for a moment, and it was more than possible that he might have been deceived. Still, to make sure of his safety, he thought to step behind some friendly tree. Consternation seized him upon discovering that none were within stepping distance!

Exposed and weaponless! He stood for a moment paralyzed at the situation. The very discovery sent fear to his heart, and with a desperate bound he sprung for the shelter of a large fallen tree.

But the movement produced tantalizing laugh, and shouts of triumph. Two men sprung out just in front of him, while numbers burst from each quarter of the thicket, and gave a rapid pursuit.

A quick glance revealed to Mark the only avenue through which he could possibly escape, and toward this he sprung with all his power.

"Head him off!" "Shoot the cuss!" roared three or four voices from behind.

But the prowess of his foes, whoever they might be, did not seem likely to prevail. The young man rushed forward with the speed of a startled deer, and but for an unlucky fact would have baffled the yelling host without trouble. Not until his feet were almost upon them did the young man notice that his way was choked by a mass of wild grape-vines. Such was the fact, and before he could check his wild career he was in the midst of them. Both his feet were caught, and he was thrown with great force to the ground, hopelessly entangled.

One or two shots were fired as the fugitive fell, but they passed harmless. The nearest pursuer would be upon the young man in a few moments. Carefully he withdrew his feet from the network of vines, and prepared to spring up once more. Yet, when upon the point of leaping to his feet he paused, and sunk back horrified.

A hideous rattlesnake, alarmed by his fall, was rapidly unwinding itself from the vine above. Already the forked tongue and deadly fangs were within a foot of the young man's face. In a moment he might expect to feel the fatal

puncture. The slightest movement would render the awful result inevitable. Would the snake strike?

That he would, and his blow would be *death!* But not as Mark feared—the young man was not to be the victim.

The foremost of the pursuers, a great burly fellow, disguised as an Indian, and flourishing a pistol, rushed upon the scene. Bending over the fallen scout he shouted:

“Keep quiet there, my foine lad, or I’ll let a streak o’ daylight through yer karkiss. Jest lay quiet a minit—oh! oh!—o-o-o-ooh!”

His remarks ended with a shriek so horrible that no pen could describe it. This was caused by the rapid movement of the snake, which he did not perceive till he felt a cold cravat gliding about his neck, and the deadly fangs tearing his face and throat! In a moment he was beside his intended prisoner, rolling in the agonies of mortal fear and pain.

This wholly unlooked-for occurrence caused a momentary uncertainty and consternation among the pursuers. To take advantage of this was Mark’s aim. His feet were already extricated, but to get clear of the entangling vines was the work of some moments. But the pursuers did not remain long in uncertainty. One of the number paused to kill the deadly serpent, while the balance of the party sprung after Morton. Before the young man succeeded in getting free of the vines, one of them, almost a giant in stature, rushed in front of him, brandishing his clubbed rifle.

“Stop!” he cried. “Stop! We’ve got use for ye, and if ye don’t wait I’ll mash ye as I would a cattepillar!”

Mark did not know what sort of men these were, with whom he had to deal, nor could he surmise any reason for their treatment of him. They were evidently white men, though such as he had seen were disguised as Indians. The very fact of their wishing to make him a prisoner, however, was proof enough that they meant him no good. He had no time for reflection, but simply determined that he would not be taken if it were possible to avoid it.

He grasped a heavy oaken bough, which lay beside him, and swept away the poised rifle; but before he could administer a *quietus* to the owner of it, he was struck to the earth by a sweeping blow from the stock of a gun, given from behind.

Though blinded and confused, Mark was not stunned, and he still struggled desperately against his foes. It was but wasted valor. Half a dozen men threw themselves upon him, and in a very few moments he was securely bound with cords and rawhide thongs.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, gazing from one to another of his disguised captors.

He hoped to recognize some of them, but in this, too, he was foiled, their disguises being so perfect that if they were not strangers he could not penetrate it in the shadowed moonlight.

"What is all this for?" he again demanded, as no answer was given. "Is there a scarcity of Indians to fight, so that white men must needs assault one another in this way?"

"Ye needn't be 'tall alarmed," replied one of them, "for we don't karkilate tew harm ye, pervidin' ye keep quiet, and ahave yerself like an 'onist feller."

"What do you mean, then, by abusing me in this way?"

"Now, see here, chap," broke in another, "ye needn't take it so mightily tew heart, 'cause I'll be bound ye shall fare jest as well as ye ever did, if ye only keep a trifle shady. Ye see we're a band o' spesherl perlice, and we hev concluded tew put ye in fer a week, 'cause ye seem tew be ruther of a dangerous character. The sign'll come all right tew let ye out ag'in purty soon. Now, don't trouble me while I put this hankercher around yer eyes."

Thus speaking, the ruffian dropped a bandage over the prisoner's face, so heavy that it not only precluded vision, but nearly smothered him. It was drawn tight, after which the thongs were removed from his legs, so that he could walk, and the party set forth.

Of course Mark could tell nothing of the direction or distance traveled. He only knew that they went on, mile after mile, he breathing meanwhile with great difficulty, and at length beginning to grow faint and giddy from the want of fresh air. His captors conversed unreservedly, but as the thick bandage was over his ears, as well as eyes, he could understand nothing which was said.

Finally the party halted for a time. When they moved forward again the prisoner was lifted bodily from the ground,

and borne in that manner. When they next halted it was evidently at their destination. There were a few hurried words, and then the handkerchief was removed from the young scout's eyes. No ray of light was revealed to the aching orbs. Although it must be well into the forenoon, all was profound blackness there, and while Mark was endeavoring to accustom himself to the gloom, a door was shut with a dull, heavy sound. A faint, tantalizing laugh was borne to the young man's ears, and then all was still.

CHAPTER V.

DAN'S DOINGS.

OF course the reader will have decided that Dan Rawlins was concerned in the dark scheme which placed Mark Morton in durance. In order to present more in detail the part which he played, we must return to the moment when he left the youth's side, to investigate the "hoots" which had startled them with fears of an Indian visitation.

Dan was startled at the sounds quite as much as his more youthful companion, but his emotions were from another instinct. He fancied that in the dull hoot which any forest owl might have given, he recognized a familiar signal. Hence his haste to investigate the matter, and his anxiety to keep Mark in the background till he might satisfy himself in regard to the nature of the sounds. Disposing of the young man, as we have seen, he hastened away in the direction whence the signal came, using all due caution, in order that he might not stumble into any unfortunate adventure.

Proceeding as far as he thought best, he waited for a repetition of the sounds. The hooting was not immediately repeated, but instead, he heard a cautious step, and the light rustling of a moving figure, a few yards distant. There were two of the prowlers, at least, and as they might be savages, or might be something else, Dan stepped behind a tree. Almost at the same instant whispered words reached his ears,

and after listening to a few sentences he advanced from his hiding-place.

"Who goes there?" he demanded, with a peculiar intonation.

"Wal, boys, I'll be blowed if here ain't the 'Cub,' right among us!" bawled a harsh voice. "What d'ye say to that, chaps?"

A dozen lawless expressions of satisfaction went up from as many whisky-seared throats. Immediately a dark-looking gang began to pour from the forest near by, and gather about Dan, who seemed perfectly at home in the midst of the villainous crew.

"How air ye, old hoss?" "Glad tew see yer!" "How came ye in this hyar locality?" and a score of similar questions and congratulations were rained upon the huge scout.

Dan shook each hand heartily as it was presented, before answering a word, closely surveying each face as it passed, meanwhile.

"Wal, boys," he finally replied, "I cum out here with another feller, on a kind o' bizness, though I'd no idee o' meetin' the '*Hoss-Shoe Band*' in this part o' the country. But it's lucky ye are here, 'cause I've somethin' in the wind I may need yer help about. So jest keep yerselves shady a minnit, boys. You, Tom Millen, and Jack Kingsley, come out this way a jiffin; I want tew consult with ye."

The two persons addressed—rough and reckless fellows they were, as revealed by the pale star-light—left their comrades and followed Dan Rawlins from the spot. At the distance of fifty yards they paused, and gathered in a close group, so that the softest tones could be distinctly heard by each.

"Now then," said Dan, sinking his voice to a guttural growl, "I'm going tew tell ye jest the fix I'm in, and then maybe ye kin hit on some way to help me out."

"All right. We'll stan' by the 'Cub' long as we hang together," was the encouraging response.

"Wal, ye see, to start on, the Injins, it seems, hev been up to Eaton's, jest this side o' Fort Jackson, killed the men, and tuk the wimmin-folks off prisoners. Now ye've hearn speak o' the gal, and know about what I think of her. Hold on;

wait till I get through afore ye break in. Wal, it seems Mark Morton feels jest about as I dew consarnin' the gal. I happened tew come across him jest before I found out what had tuk place. I wasn't in the best o' feelin' toward the feller, but I wouldn't quarrel with him. Of course I couldn't stay thar and know't the gal was in danger, so I sot off. Mark would come with me, acause he's bound tew hev the gal. So I let him come, and he's waitin' for me over yender."

"Let him wait," brought out Tom Millen, savagely. "Maybe we know a thing or tew about the gal what yew don't!"

"Do you know whar she is?" demanded Dan, catching the speaker by the arm.

"Sartin; we've hed an eye on her severil miles back. They're over the next knoll, jest settled down tew sleep, with the gal as fast as kin be."

"Is that a fact? How many of the red-skins may thar be?"

"Oh, say eighteen or twenty?"

"'Nuff tew make a purty stiff fight."

"We don't need tew fight 'em," broke in Jack Kingsley, a great strapping fellow, almost as large as Dan himself.

"How'll we git the gal, then? Can we steal her away?"

"Whar's yer wits, boss?" demanded Jack, with a laugh. "Don't ye know the reds want hosses wuss nor they dew gals? They've seen the Hoss-Shoe Band afore!"

"Yas, so they hev," Dan mused. "Have ye found out any thing what ye kin dew?"

"Course not! We knew yew war clus at hand, and we wanted yer tew hev the biggest voice in the matter. Now, we'll wait and see what yew say."

The leader of the horse-thieves, for such was Dan Rawlins—such were his associates—paused for a moment, looking about impatiently.

"I mustn't stay any longer," he said. "That chap might git a notion of what was goin' on, and that would lead to somethin' unpleasant. You, Tom, know somethin' of the Injin jabber, so you'd better go over to the Injin camp, and see what ye kin dew with 'em. Drive as sharp a bargain as ye kin for the gal, and pay 'em in hoss-flesh, if thar's any sich thing. If we can't git her that way we must fight for her, 'cause the gal I'm bound tew hev! You, Jack, keep the boys

shady, meantime. I'll go back and get this feller tew sleep, and then I'll be round ag'in—say in a couple of hours."

A few minor arrangements were made, after which the two lieutenants departed upon their missions, while Dan rapidly retraced his steps to the place where he had left the young man. There, by the spoken and acted lie, he succeeded in deceiving him, as we have seen, and finally induced him to sleep, which he did with the soundness produced by exhaustion, and a sense of security.

When the horse-thief was satisfied that Mark was fast asleep, he regained his feet, taking his rifle and equipments, which he placed at some distance. Returning, he proceeded to rob the sleeper in a manner so systematic as to leave no doubt of the operator's proficiency. Then, making certain that he had not been observed, he glided away with a profound sense of satisfaction.

"Sleep on," he muttered, casting back an evil glance. "I could fix ye mighty easy, so ye never'd be troubled with wakin' up ag'in. But, I reckin it's jest as well as 'tis. So I'll leave ye, tew hev a good nap, and hope when ye wake up ye'll hev good luck gittin' back hum ag'in; 'cause this is a kind o' skitterish place, and no mistake."

Slinging the two rifles across his back, and taking something of a circuitous route, Dan returned to the place where he had arranged to meet his subordinates. No one was there, but a cautious signal speedily brought Jack Kingsley. As the messenger had not yet returned from the Indian camp, the two huge villains seated themselves upon the ground, and spent the time in discussing various plans and enterprises, bearing no relation to the subject of which we are treating.

In fifteen minutes Tom Millen made his appearance. So subtle and cautious were his movements, that those in waiting did not discover him till he stood before them.

"Here, at last," he said, smiling at the visible start of Jack and Dan.

"Yis, I see," returned Dan, rising to his feet. "What luck?"

"Oh, I'm always in luck—was this time. I found the old chap—old Ti-no-de-ga is in charge of the band. He's rayther inclined tew keep the gal, at fust. But I talked reason tew

him, and made him an all-fired many fine promises as to what we boys 'd do for him, and all that. Wal, then he kinder seemed tew think better on't, and said if we'd bring him down five nice hosses, we could hev the gal. I tried tew git him down one or tew, but narry a hoss 'd he let off."

"Five hosses," Dan repeated, with some hesitation. "Wal, the old chap puts a stiff price on her, but maybe we'd better pay that than to try gittin' her any other way. You take some men, Jack, and go for the hosses, while the rest of us sleep a little."

Jack proceeded to select four trusty men, and with little preparation they were ready to leave the place. After they had gone Dan and Tom canvassed the place thoroughly, set guards at certain points, and slept the time away till their horsemen should return.

It was three hours later, possibly something more, when the tramping of horses was heard, and five riders carefully approached the outlaw's bivouac. Being halted, and passed by the guards, they rode a little further along, and dismounted, just as Dan, who very reluctantly waked from a sound sleep, came forward. The animals were examined, groomed a trifle, and then the party took their way toward the Indian camp, being well prepared for any attempt at treachery on the part of the savages.

To reach the Indian camp, satisfy the guards that their mission was one of peace, and send for the chief of the party, Ti-no-de-ga, was but the work of a few minutes. Nor were they kept long in waiting. The chief was delighted at the idea of exchanging a comparatively useless prisoner for five valuable horses, and his deep-set eyes sparkled with avaricious satisfaction, as he surveyed the impatient animals.

A few sentences in the Indian tongue passed between Tom Millen and the Indian chief, after which attendant braves led the animals away, and Ti-no-de-ga himself pointed out the sleeping maiden. There was an attempt at negotiation on the part of the savage, who wished to make an exchange of the aunt for more horses, but, the white men would listen to no proposition of the kind. At some future time it was possible they might give a horse or two for the old lady, but not at present.

After some directions to his followers, Dan drew off his coat, slung his rifle across his back, and bent over the captive girl. She was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. The moon had just risen sufficiently to light up her features, on which the sorrow-marks were apparent, even in her slumber. The spectacle of overshadowing anguish was so touching that even the coarse heart of Dan Rawlins was moved as he gazed upon it.

"Never mind," he said, as his selfish passion asserted itself. "She feels jest as I like tew hev her feel. Now she'll be mighty glad tew get out of this, and if old Dan Rawlins don't get the promise of a wife, then I'm blessedly mistaken—that's all."

Throwing his coat over her face, so as to prevent her seeing any thing when she should awake, the Herculean villain gathered her in his arms with one quick motion, and bounded away into the forest. His burden was nothing, as the maiden was really but a child, when compared with the giant who carried her.

Almost with the movement which raised her from the earth she awoke, and feeling that she was being borne away, commenced struggling to free her face from the heavy cloth which enveloped it. Her feet alone had been bound, the savages judging rightly enough that she could never untie the sharp thongs of elk-skin which bound them. Her arms were quite confined by the coat, and while she was struggling to get them free and uncover her face, Dan succeeded in putting considerable distance between them and the Indian camp.

"Where am I?" the maiden demanded; a faint hope that she was being rescued breaking over her stricken heart as she recognized the fact that a white man was bearing her.

"'Sh! No words now," Dan hissed, in impassioned tones; "I've got ye so fur away from the cusses, but if ye make any noise they may take arter us. So say nothin', but trust tew me."

"Oh, am I to be delivered from those dreadful savages?" the maiden murmured in a faint whisper: "I thank you, sir, I thank the good Lord, too."

And in sweet confidence she relapsed into silence, never doubting that each step took her further from danger—nearer to safety. Ah! poor human confidence!

For a mile or more Dan plunged through the forest with unabated energy, pausing for a few moments, at times, under pretense of listening for sounds of pursuit. Of course his shallow plot was to convince the maiden that he was rescuing her from danger at the imminent peril of his life. Very naturally she would be filled with gratitude for his kindness, and admiration of his daring. To play upon these feelings, and win her consent to become his wife at the first opportunity, was now the darling scheme of the plotter. In case this failed he could plot further; for she was now in his power, and the dark man was not disposed to relinquish the advantage thus suddenly and easily gained.

Already Dan was building abundant castles in the air, while flying in mock haste through the forest, bearing in his arms the maiden against whose holiest affections he was thus basely scheming.

Having traveled some time, Dan made a pretense of breathing more freely, and after slipping his burden to the ground inquired if she felt able to walk a short distance.

"I reckin as howt we've gin 'em a nice slip," he pursued, "an' I shouldn't wonder if they hadn't found out yet 'at I've got ye. I know a place, if we can only git thar, that'll be purty safe, and I reckin it'll take smarter red-skins than I ever seen tew find it."

They pushed forward for an hour, when the sudden hoot of an owl in the distance, answered by another much nearer, fell upon their ears. For a few moments Dan walked on unheedingly, then paused and listened.

"Could them 'ere have been Injins?" he asked, in feigned alarm. As the girl made no response, he added: "We're so near our destination now 'at I don't want the savages tew git on our track. You jest wait here a moment, while I creep back and see if thar's any thin' out o' the way."

Dan placed her in the branches of a low evergreen, and bidding her keep perfectly quiet, he hastened away.

For what seemed a long time Minnie Eaton remained upon her uncomfortable perch, shivering with cold and fear, listening in terrible suspense to catch each trifling sound, and shuddering at the silence when no sound reached her ears.

dan leapt off his horse and rode to him a short
distance, and in a few moments he was seated on the
ground, leaning his back against a large rock.

CHAPTER VI.

WORKING OF THE SCHEME.

THE signal which reached the ears of Dan Rawlins, as described in the last chapter, came from the Horse-Shoe Band. We design giving the reader no particular introduction to this nest of outlaws, but shall reveal so much of their character and operations as the interests of our story may require.

The leader of the ruffian host hastened in the direction whence the sounds proceeded, but paused upon hearing the click of a gun-lock, and the rough hail of:

"Halt! Who's that?"

"Yew hain't seen nothin' of a *hoss-shew* in these yere parts, Irev ye?" Dan asked, with a peculiar twang to his voice.

"Reckin I hev," was the hearty response of Tom Millen, the second in authority among the gang, and chief director in Dan's absence. "Ye see, I thort it possible ye might want tew leave some particular directions afore ye left us for good, and so I follerred ye to see."

"No, I don't think of any thing but what yew kin manage as well as I, and for that matter better, acause yer hand is in. Ye see, I'm goin' tew be champyun for this gal awhile, and I must leave the hoss-shoes for you to take keer of while I'm at that bizness."

"Yis, I know all that. But what I meant more particular was about that young feller. Don't ye think we'd better take him and shet him up, so't he won't bother any till—wal, ye know, when—when yer all right?"

"Yis, that would be well enough," the unscrupulous master-spirit replied. "Thar's plenty of places, I carkilate, whar the upstart could be kept awhile, and never be any the wiser as to who had him or whar he was."

"Sartin. We kin put him—"

"Never mind whar. I don't want ter know any thing about it. Jest put him in a place tew suit yerself, and keep him thar till I tell ye ter let him out. I'll see tew the gal myself."

Thus the conference ended. The immediate result to Mark we have seen.

Dan Rawlins hastened back to the place where he had left the girl, and at once removed her from the uncomfortable perch among the cedar-boughs.

"Thar ain't a bit o' danger," he said, in a most assuring tone. "I've nosed the woods over all around, and not a sign is thar of any Injin. 'Twar an old owl, no doubt of it, so we'll be travelin' ag'in, if you're ready."

"I am," the maiden replied. "I should rather die than fall into the hands of the savages again, and to think that you were thus rewarded for daring my rescue would be even more bitter than the peril to myself."

The glowing warmth and grateful accent of her words thrilled the schemer, and sent the blood in swifter currents through his veins. His vile passions were stirring, and once he even bent over to kiss the helpless maid, but he restrained. Something in that look of holy trust checked him for the moment, and before the purpose was adopted again, the former scheming craftiness returned.

"No, no," he mused. "I'll not be a fool and spoil it all. Every thing is workin' fust rate. All I'll hev to do is wait, and that is not very hard."

Then, aloud, he asked:

"Are you tired, little one?"

The words were spoken in a tone of fond sympathy.

"Oh no, sir," she replied, with a sweet confidence which thrilled him even more than her former words. "I am not very tired, only every thing seems so strange and dreadful that I can scarcely realize that it is all fact."

"But that ain't the best on't. Ye see I hain't told ye afore, 'cause I's a leetle afeard somebody might overhear us. But now ye'll want ter know how yer goin' tew git away, most likely. Thar's an old harmit lives a little ways from here, and if he hain't the best o' accommodations he's a nice old feller, and the Injins all think he's a medisun-man. Ye'll be jist as safe in his cabin all day as ye would in Fort Jackson. We'll stay over thar to-day, 'cause it won't dew for us to try goin' on in daylight. Maybe by night we can start out ag'in, and git intew the fort all right."

"But my poor aunt is with the Indians," moaned Minnie. "What will become of her? Is there no help for her?"

"I'm purty sartin thar is," Dan replied, with a cheering voice, "and that is one o' the reasons for my wantin' tew stay around here. If we can git her away tew I shall be well satisfied."

"Oh, I do hope it may be!" Minnie exclaimed, clasping her hands together in her earnestness.

"Wal, it *shall* be, you poor gal! My name is Dan Rawlins, and as fur as man are consarned I'll allow I've been a rough kind of feller. But my idees are mostly in the right place, and if I set about tew dew the right thing I gen'rally make out."

"I feel that I may trust you," the maiden returned.

"Wal, now, that's a great conserlashun tew a feller at first start. I won't make any promise, but, when the time comes you'll gin'rally find me all right."

"Who is this hermit, and why is he living away here in the wilderness?" Minnie asked.

"Sorry I can't tell ye all ye'd like to know," Dan answered, with the utmost apparent frankness; "but, in fact, though I'm well acquainted with him, I don't know any thing about him. He lives here all alone, and holds some kind of power over the Injins, but what that is I do not know. I asked him once, but he sed, 'Oh, the reds think I'm a medisin-man!' and that was all I could git from him. He calls hisself Oliver Rounds, and lives jest thru yender. Ye kin most see his hut from here."

"It makes little matter who he is, if he will befriend us now," Minnie remarked.

"He orter," Dan returned, quickly, "for now I think of it he pretends tew be a Quaker, or Friend, as he calls himself."

Minnie had often heard of the Quakers, and she felt certain that one of the faith would be really a friend to her, even though they were strangers and he a hermit. Soon they reached the lone, dismal-looking hut which Dan assured her was their destination. The girl was surprised as she glanced around, and an instinctive feeling of distrust arose in her mind as she surveyed the place by the mingled moonlight and dawn.

Viewed externally, every thing bore the marks of desertion. Rank weeds grew about the door, while bushes obstructed their progress in every direction. The hut itself seemed almost imbedded in a hedge, and the narrow loop-holes, which answered the triple purpose of light, ventilation, and defense, were half hidden by the luxurious growth.

The first summons brought no response, and, after waiting some moments, Dan proceeded to open the door, and pushed his half-reluctant companion inside.

"I don't believe the old feller's at hum," he said, by way of apology. "Anyhow, it won't dew for us to wait out here till some prowlin' sneak spies us. No, the old chap is away; but we'll make ourselves at hum, all the same. I know him wal unuff, so it'll be all right, you see."

"Ye see it's jest here," he continued: "the Injins are awake by this time, sartin, and hev found out what's up. Now, they won't be likely to rest in quiet so long as they think possible ye may be anywhar's around. Keep still, my gal, and I'll try to find ye suthin' tew eat."

"I'm not hungry," Minnie protested.

But Dan paid no attention to her words, proceeding to ransack an old, ill-constructed cupboard which stood in one corner of the apartment.

In a short time he produced some cold meats, and other viands, scarcely to be expected from the larder of a Quaker hermit. To these he led the trembling girl, bidding her eat as heartily as possible, that her strength might be equal to the trials still before them. Notwithstanding the maiden's late protest, she found the food so palatable that she partook quite heartily, confessing, when the meal was over, that she felt a fresh degree of strength and energy.

Dan had not been idle meantime, and when the empty dishes had been replaced, he led Minnie to a couch, carefully constructed of evergreen boughs, which really looked inviting after the late hard experience.

"Set down, or lay down, my gal," he said in tones of kindness and affection, "jest as suits ye; only make sure ye rest yerself. I'll go out on a kind o' scout, and see if I kin make any diskiveries. Must be old Oliver is around somer's; he never gits fur away."

The designing knave made a great display of looking at his weapons, peered through the loop-holes, and finally opening the door, stepped forth.

Sinking back upon the couch, Minnie lay for some time thinking over the strange scenes through which she had passed, as well as her present peculiar and unenviable position. She thought of her strange preserver, and recollects some things which looked a trifle mysterious; but her confidence was great, and believing that she was safe now, allowed herself to sink into slumber. Not that she intended to sleep — quite otherwise.

Some time later she was awakened by voices. Upon looking she saw that her supposed preserver stood within the apartment, and beside him was another whom she recognized as the Quaker of whom he had spoken. Half frightened, she started up, but the old hermit put her back gently.

"Rest thee in peace, my child," he said, in tones almost too soft and smooth to be natural. "I know thee needs rest sadly, for my very noble friend, Daniel, hath told me of the peril thee hast been in. The poor accommodations of my humble roof are thine, so long as thou wilt share them, and if the worst should befall, my feeble influence with the red sons of the forest shall be given to thee if it can avail anything."

This speech seemed to have been studied with much care, for when it was completed the disguised horse-thief fell back with much the manner of a boy orator who has finished his maiden effort upon the stage.

But Minnie did not notice any thing wrong then. She saw the white beard, heard the kindly tones, and marked the glowing satisfaction of her deliverer. She listened to the repeated assurance that her present position was secure from all danger, so far as Indians were concerned, and, realizing that fact, she thanked God for the kindness which had wrought her deliverance.

She had noticed that another apartment, evidently smaller, existed beyond the one they had entered, and into this the two men now retired, bidding her rest and sleep if possible, while they prepared a more fitting place for her.

It was nearly an hour before they returned. At first there

were sounds of some movements being made in the apartment, but they soon ceased, and it appeared that the men were engaged in close conversation, as sometimes the maiden could hear the indistinct hum of voices. That they were conversing in regard to her she felt no doubt; but the thought gave her no special uneasiness.

"Wal, miss," said Dan, as they reentered the outer apartment, "we've fixed ye up a room so't ye kin be by yerself long as we hev to stay here. Coorse 'tain't no ways nice, but then we know how a gal feels about sich things naterally, and we want tew yewmur 'em as much as possible. Besides, nothin' is more likely than that the Injins may take a noshin tew drop in on us, an' 'twouldn't dew to hev ye in sight. The heathin! I wish we was both well hum."

Minnie, though not suspicious of any meditated wrong, would have preferred to remain with them, as she seemed safer where she could look upon the faces of friends. But Dan's stern arguments, and the milder persuasions of Rounds finally overcame the few objections she felt, and she entered the apartment fitted up for her.

The door closed, and Minnie Eaton was a close, though unsuspecting, prisoner!

The plotting villains exchanged quick glances, of unmistakable import, and a half-dozen muttered sentences passed expressive of their satisfaction.

But Minnie knew nothing of this. She was occupied in making a quick survey of the cheerless room and its belongings. There was a couch of boughs, tolerably well arranged, with a covering of skins, and this was about the only object in the apartment which had any interest for her. Throwing herself upon this, and reflecting that if they proceeded with their journey during the night she should require all possible rest, she endeavored to sleep. But, the more ardently she wooed the gentle god, the more intractable he was, and she finally relinquished the endeavor for a time.

CHAPTER VII.

NOT QUITE.

IT was afternoon.

Minnie Eaton still remained in the room which had been prepared for her. Once during the forenoon Dan had rapped carefully at her door, and, on being bidden to enter, had done so. If he had any unworthy object in consideration he allowed it to pass, contenting himself with a short conversation in regard to the outer prospects, which, he said, still continued fair. The maiden was urged to hope that they might be able to set forth again at nightfall, and requested to get strong for the occasion. Dan took his leave with many assurances of deep friendship, and unswerving devotion, leaving the girl overwhelmed with gratitude for his earnest efforts in her behalf.

Dinner came punctually when the sun was at his height, brought in by the pretended Quaker, who took the opportunity to pour forth a sea of *thees* and *thous*, to the praise of "friend Daniel's" prowess and daring in the maiden's behalf.

The food was quite palatable, but Minnie ate sparingly. So great was her anxiety in regard to what the next few days, or perhaps hours, might bring forth, that the most dainty delicacies would have met but little attention.

"Verily, I hope thee is not going to be sick," the hermit remarked, when he came to remove the dishes. "It would grieve the heart of friend Daniel right sore, if such a misfortune befall thee."

Minnie assured the fellow that there was no immediate danger, as she should not allow herself to become seriously ill till they reached a place of safety.

The circling hours rolled on very slowly, and about three in the afternoon she had begun to look for the setting of the sun. A peep from one of the loop-holes showed her that the orb of day had scarcely made half its descent to the western horizon.

"Oh dear!" she sighed, clasping her hands, and pacing back and forth in the narrow confines; "how shall I pass the long hours till darkness comes? This suspense is unbearable, and I can not sleep. I wonder if it would be dangerous for me to go out and inhale a few breaths of fresh air? I will ask them—that can do no hurt."

She turned toward the door, but before reaching it heard footsteps approaching from the other side. She paused mechanically, and presently heard the same low rap which had greeted her ears once before.

"Come in," she said, adding to herself, "it is Daniel, and while he is here I shall not feel so lonely."

Other thoughts pressed upon her mind, but she had no time to give them form. The door opened, and the burly form of Dan Rawlins entered. The maiden met him with a glad smile, which was mirrored back from his swarthy countenance in one of satisfied villainy.

Unversed in the mysteries of human rascality the poor victim could not suppose for one moment that the plausible words and kind attentions of her two friends could cover a base plot. She measured others by her own standard of purity.

"I thought yer might be kind o' lonesome," Dan remarked, with an air of easy assurance, "and so I come in ter stay with ye a while."

"I am very glad," was the ready answer. "It is quite lonely here, and I have so much to think of, that I dread being left alone. I do wish my poor aunt was here."

"Oh, she's safe," Dan returned, carelessly. "I've been on a scout, and I've found out a thing or tew. The Injins are layin' thar whar we left 'em, and yer aunt is with 'em yit. I 'spect they're lookin' round for ye purty sharp yit, but I didn't see any thin' speshilly s'pishus. I'll keep an eye on 'em, and if thar's any sech thing as gittin' the other one away to-night it shall be done."

"Oh, I thank you, sir; words can but very feebly express my gratitude. I am sure my aunt, too, will bless you to the day of her death. If there is any way we can—but I can't speak of repaying you, sir—for we are left all alone, and destitute in the world."

The maiden's eyes filled with tears, and a choking in her throat nearly prevented her utterance. For a moment she struggled, and then succeeded in gaining control of her emotion. Dan felt that the proper moment had come, and without reflection he resolved to play his strongest card.

"Thar, thar," he exclaimed, gashing his rough hand across eyes that were quite tearless, "don't speak nothin' about what I've done, or what I'm goin' tew do. 'Tain't nothin', but what I'll be glad to dew a thousand times over for yer dear sake!"

He had watched the maiden carefully, to see the effect of his words, and he saw her start slightly as he thus spoke. But, it was not a start of displeasure; he was satisfied upon that point.

"Ye must forgive me if I speak it right out," he said, with a vastly different tone. "I've been thinkin' these yer things over all day, and I can't rest no longer till we've talked it over, if ye will."

"I can certainly have nothing to forgive," Minnie replied, with frankness, "from one who has shown his friendship and devotion as you have done! I hope you will speak your thoughts plainly, for I should be very ungrateful if I did not listen to such a friend."

"Then I'm going to speak right out. I've got a little story tew tell, an' it may as well be told now as ever. You may think I'm only your friend, my dear gal, but I tell you it's such friendship as I never felt afore, and never expect tew ag'in. Now let me say my say, and then I've nothin' more to dew. I shall leave every thing tew yer kind heart, and I know that won't wrong any human bein'. Now, when we both lived thar in the settlements I knew I had a kind o' likin' for ye, and couldn't bear tew be away so I didn't see ye every day or tew. But then I didn't know what my real feelin's was. I knew I was a great, rough chap, inclined tew hev my way, right or wrong, and nothin' of a lady's man about me.

"Wal, I's on my way out through thar, tew see ye, if I didn't git a chance to say a word, when I found out that the Injins had been on, burnt up the house, and tuk ye off prisoner. What a blow that was! But I didn't wait long to

lament. Now, thinks I, if ye love this gal, Dan Rawlins, 'tis yer time to show it. I found out five fellers had gone, and I told the company I'd foller on. Mark Morton started with me."

"Mark! Where is he?" Minnie asked, interrupting the story.

"Comin' right tew that. As I's goin' tew say, he come on for a few miles, till we found whar the other five had got bushed, and all killed, and thar the feller's heart give out. 'It's no use goin' any furder,' he said. 'We can't git the gal, and I'll only git killed ourselves. I don't want her bad enuff tew go any furder, so ye kin hev yer chance in welcome.' I didn't like tew hear the feller say so, and I tried tew persuade him better, sayin' we'd stick tewgether, and make the best on't. But, 'twas all no use, and seein' he would go back, sez I, 'Go it; ye wouldn't be good for any thing with me.'"

He turned full toward the trembling girl, who in vain endeavored to speak. She had loved Mark Morton, and hung with trembling expectancy upon the part he should have performed.

Of course she could not think of doubting the word of him who had just spoken. Stricken dumb by a sudden reaction of feeling, she sat like one in a trance.

The villain saw his success, and resolved to follow it up. The task was easy.

Already the maiden had come to look upon him as her only and devoted friend. The way to the accomplishment of his schemes was becoming easier each moment.

"I've been a-thinkin', this forenoon," Dan went on, "about these things, and how ye wouldn't really hev any hum at present. Yer poor father's gone, and yer brother, leavin' ye destitute, as it were. Thar's no one tew look out for ye, an' that's a thing that's needed now, whar thar's so many loose sort o' characters around. I don't know's I erter ask ye to marry sech an old hulk as me; but, I'm goin' tew dew it. Jest as I am, here I be! I love ye—possibly ye may hev seen that by my dewin's. I'll be as good to ye as any man can, an' try an' dew better in the futer. Now ye hev it all. What do ye say?"

Minnie did not speak. She could not. But she allowed Dan to take her hand, and press and kiss it. She looked up into his apparently honest features, thought how devoted he had been to her, and what he had dared in the attempt to save her from a horrible fate. Then she reflected upon the circumstances which surrounded her. All that he had said was true ; she needed a protector. She thought of Mark—then remembered how he had relinquished her to her fate, from which Dan had saved her. The question arose, had she any right to refuse her deliverer ? No doubt she should soon love him, if she did not already feel more than gratitude toward him.

"I won't press ye now," he said, seeing her hesitation. "To be sure 'twould make me the happiest fellow alive to know I was suthin' more than a friend in the eyes of such a woman ; but it's a very important thing, and I don't want ye to act till ye're satisfied."

"Oh, I owe you more than every thing!" the maiden exclaimed, half wildly. "My mind is all in a whirl now ; I can not think, if I would. Give me a little time to reflect, before pressing me to a final answer."

"Then you'll not cast me off entirely?"

There was a hopeful tone in the words which struck upon the maiden's heart. Half her indecision was gone already.

"Oh, no," replied the maiden, "you may hope for the best."

Had Dan Rawlins pressed his suit for fifteen minutes more, there can be no doubt that he would have been successful. The trusting maiden would have rejected her former lover, now that she supposed him guilty of leaving her to the tender mercies of the Indians, without making any effort in her behalf. This done she would not have hesitated long before giving her hand to the wretch, who had thus far succeeded so nicely in all his dark schemes.

For a moment he remained bending over her, then rising to his full height, he said :

"I must go now and take another look around. If it's a posseble thing I shell bring off yer aunt, soon as it's dark enough. It's posseble I may never see ye ag'in. If any thing

should happen to keep me from endin' the work I've begun, old Oliver'll see ye safe to Jackson."

"Oh, don't speak of that!" Minnie urged. "You must be very careful, for my sake. You are all the friend I have in the world!"

"Oh, I will be keerful," was the artful rejoinder. "Still, if I should have any chance to help yer aunt I shonldn't be tew timid, 'cause I don't want tew see the poor lady took off among the Injins, if I kin help it."

There was a momentary clasping of hands, and then the deceiver passed out. Dropping upon her rude couch, Minnie lay for an hour, thinking of the scene through which she had passed.

A beam of sunlight, which had penetrated one of the loopholes, and fallen in a golden tiara upon her pallid brow, aroused her, and she looked up to see whence it came. At this time she observed that the narrow fissures were much choked by the rank weeds which grew there.

"I can possibly make the place a little more cheerful," she thought.

Acting upon this idea, she sought for something with which to open a passage through the obstructions, and allow the air and sunlight to enter more freely. She was not long in finding a splinter adapted to her purpose, and forthwith set to work.

While thus engaged, she heard the sound of voices at a short distance. Recognizing the accents of the English language, she paused to listen. The first sentence she distinctly heard riveted her attention, and she waited to hear more.

This was what she heard.

"Give me my pistol, I tell ye!"

"Hush, Rube, you're drunk," responded a second voice. "You shall have your pistol when you get sober."

"I tell ye I want it now! Ye needn't think acause ye're a regelar hoss-thief, and make yer livin' at it, ye kin steal from the craft—not by a hat full of rattlesnakes!"

"I tell ye, Rube, I'll report ye to Dan, if ye ain't more quiet. What if somebody from outside should hear ye?"

"I don't give a consarn for you, or Dan either. He's a hoss-thief, I tell ye, and the big toad in the puddle, at that

Whose bosses was it he gin for the gal, last night? and who helped put young Morton up among the rocks? I tell you I know enuff to hang you and Dan Rawlins both, and I'll tell out, if ye don't use a feller about square."

The voices were now lost upon turning an angle of the building; but Minnie hurried to the single loop-hole upon the end, and saw them moving away through the underbrush. The sunlight fell full upon them, and she recognized the one who had spoken most calmly as *her venerable Quaker protector!*

For a moment, universal darkness seemed to have usurped the light, and Minnie's brain reeled while she staggered beneath the fearful discovery. Then the energy of despair returned to her. Flying to the rude door, she grasped the latch in both her hands. All her strength would not make it budge a hair!

There was no other opening through which it was possible for her to escape. In the moment of discovery she had felt giddy and faint, but the thought that she might open the door and dart away from the fearful men of whom she had heard so much vaguely, but whom she never expected to see, sustained her in the effort. Even to fall again into the hands of the Indians was preferable to remaining where she then was.

But now, when she found herself a prisoner, which fully confirmed the dreadful things which she had overheard, the power of thought and movement left her, and she sunk upon the floor, insensible for a time to the dreadful horrors of her situation.

CHAPTER VIII.

VARYING FORTUNES.

MARK MORTON felt *sore* in more respects than one. His head was swollen, and ached fiercely from the blow which had felled him. One shoulder was very lame, from a contusion received when he was thrown by the grape-vine.

Still his undaunted heart was full of hope, and he determined to lose no time in freeing himself from the unpleasant situation in which he was placed.

He did not spend any time in useless speculations or mental analysis. Possessed of unbounded ingenuity, he felt *sure* he should be able to regain his freedom when he had ascertained something of the place in which he was confined.

He could not see any thing ; a gloom, more intense than fabled blackness, overspread every thing, and the attempt to pierce it made the young man's eyes ache. Still he was not the less hopeful upon that account. Possibly it was not yet day, though he felt that it must be well into the forenoon ; if that were the case he must wait till he could gather his knowledge by the sense of feeling. That would require more of time and patience ; but there was no help for it.

His hands were small and flexible, while his wrists were large and full ; consequently it was but the work of a few moments to slip off the thongs which bound him. This done, he carefully disentangled them, picking all the knots, and winding the cords about his body.

"I may need them," he mused, "so it will be better to save them than throw them away."

Rising to his feet, and rubbing his arms vigorously for a few moments, he clenched his fists, muttering :

"Now I am free. Saving these bruises, I am none the worse for the good intentions of my enemies. To be sure I am a prisoner, but it won't be a long job for me to get out, I'm thinking. Let me see what the prospect is."

Pushing his hands ahead, he sought the confines of his prison, feeling his way carefully over the uneven surface of the rocky floor. Yet, careful as were his movements, at the second step he struck his head violently against a timber above —so violently, in fact, that, coupled with the already deranged condition of that organ, it felled him to the floor, where he lay for some moments, collecting his scattered senses.

"So much for the first effort," he muttered, slowly regaining his feet. "Now for another. There's something overhead ; I'll see what it is."

He examined, and found a heavy flooring of rough logs or planks, and by following out the clue thus gained, was soon

satisfied that he was in a natural pit amid rocks, which had been covered over and supplied with a trap-door.

A rough flight of steps led up to the trap. These he ascended. But all his strength was of no avail when applied to the door. After making several efforts that only increased the pain in his head, he abandoned the attempt, and returned to the pit.

In the course of his investigations, he came to one corner where the covering did not fit exactly to the rocks. A quantity of dirt was at length worked out, and light enough obtained to reveal the nature of his prison.

It was, evidently, used as a store-room, since at one end was a pile of sweet potatoes, and in the other sundry articles of provision, including a barrel of pork.

"Of course I shan't always be here alone," he reasoned, on noticing these facts. "If they don't come down on my account, they must come for other things, and then if I don't pay the thieving horde, my name isn't Mark Morton."

He looked about for a weapon, but as nothing presented, he stretched himself in the only position where he could not be seen by any person unless they descended the stairs or bent over the side. Thus he awaited the course of events.

The captive was not left long in suspense. Almost before he began to hope for it, he heard the sound of voices, and presently the trap opened slowly. There were two of the comers at least, but the young man braced his nerves more firmly, resolving to play a desperate game rather than allow the chance to pass. The opening of the trap admitted a flood of light to every part except where the youth lay. This was left in shadow, though not densely so.

"He's all right," said the foremost, after a survey. "Lays down under the stuns where we left 'im."

"Wal, take down this grub and feed him, then, while I go over and see to the other bizness."

Villain No. 2 went off growling, while the other, who had been addressed, as Seth, descended the stairs with a limited quantity of food in one hand, and a pistol in the other. He peered cautiously under, to make sure that his prisoner was still alive and secured.

"Hello, under thar," he sung out.

"What's wanting?" growled Mark, who had placed his hands beneath him, and assumed the most uncomfortable position possible.

"Sent me down to feed ye, young'un. Suspect ye wouldn't ject to a sweet 'tater or two."

"Of course not. But how am I going to eat, I'd like to know?"

"I'll feed ye—that is, if ye won't bite my fingers."

"Then be careful and not choke me."

"I'm used to feedin' babies," was the laughing response.

Laying his pistol down beside him, Seth broke a potato in twain, and commenced feeding his supposed prisoner. Mark ate several mouthfuls in silence, for he was quite a matter-of-fact young man, and knew he might need its sustenance.

Seth was entirely off his guard. The other watched for a favorable moment, and when it came he sprung to his feet, clutching the scoundrel by the throat.

"Be quiet, dog!" he hissed, "or I will kill you as I would a snake! Now do what I tell ye, if ye want to live another minute! Take off that coat."

Seth complied, though with a very poor grace. Mark had by some unaccountable means gained possession of the pistol, and its cold muzzle was looking full into its owner's face. He knew its reliance, and saw plainly enough that the young man would use it upon slight provocation.

When the coat was removed it displayed other weapons, and these Morton himself very quietly appropriated. The discomfited villain tried by several ruses to divert the other's attention, or make his escape, but it would not do. He was no match for the resolute young scout, who in five minutes left him lying upon the cold rock, bound, gagged, and deprived of his arms and disguise.

Mark had taken the precaution to change clothes with the fellow, so that when he stepped upon the outer earth it would have required a close inspection to detect the counterfeit. Fortune had favored him thus far, and the part he had acted had been quite easy, requiring only nerve in the execution. Not so easy would it be for him to maintain his disguise, make out his whereabouts, and reach a place of safety. But, his chivalrous heart gave a great bound as he stepped into

the open air, and shut down the trap. This latter was held in place by a strong wooden bolt, the whole being concealed from casual view in the most ingenious manner.

The young man saw mountains lying piled in huge masses not far away, rising in stern outline thousands of feet. To the east the progression was downward, and in that direction Morton bent his steps, without losing any time. Where to go he knew not, but as his chance lay in putting a bold face upon the matter, and pushing ahead, he did so.

Scarcely had he taken a dozen steps when he heard a voice calling to him, and on turning, saw a rough-looking individual leading a horse.

"Hold on, Bushby," the stranger sung out. "Here's the hoss; ye ain't goin' tew leave him, are ye?"

"Blast the hoss!" Mark growled, imitating to a nicety the voice of the fellow he had left in durance.

"What's come across ye, all of a sudden?" the other demanded, evidently somewhat surprised. "What hev ye got in yer eye now?"

"Oh, suthin' not wuth speakin' on. Maybe I'll tell ye when I git back."

The man with the horse had now approached so near as to place the bridle in Morton's hand. The animal was not saddled, but a blanket supplied the place, and leaping upon its back, the youth remarked:

"Jest as cheap tew ride, and take yer time, ain't it?"

"S'pose so; but say—how's greeny?"

"Oh, all right. He'll take care of himself till night."

The young man touched the animal lightly with his heel, and the intervening trees soon hid the two personages from each other.

"Hello, Seth, whar e takin' that hoss?" broke in a second voice, as he jogged slowly along.

"Oh, goin' tew head-quarters with him," was the laughing answer.

The youth, however lightly he might speak, felt far from easy in mind. Evidently he was not far from the rendezvous of the gang, and at any moment he might come full upon a force of them. Still he was resolyed to put a bold face on the matter, and trust to chance and impudence.

"Reckin ye'll hev tew bear off more tew the right," remarked the interlocutor.

"Wal, don't ask foolish questions," the youth returned, lowering his voice. "If anybody wants to know any thing about me, tell 'em I was takin' this hoss up the last you seen on me—will ye?"

"Why, what's in the wind?"

"Oh, nothin' of any consequence."

And starting up his animal he was soon out of hearing, despite the efforts of the other to stop him.

Striking here and there through the bushes, leaping fallen timber, and avoiding the more open portions of the forest, Mark made his way through the wood for some fifteen minutes before encountering another human being. Whether going in the right direction or otherwise, he could not determine, but shaping his course by the sun he kept on, his right hand resting upon a weapon, in case of any sudden danger.

Just then a figure rose from the side of the narrow path in which Mark had insensibly allowed his horse to walk, and before he could really prepare for such a movement, a hand was laid upon the bridle.

"I've waited half an hour for this hoss," said the gruff voice of Tom Millen. "Whar ye been all this while with him? Git down, now, confounded quick!"

"Guess not, if ye'd jest as livz! I've got an arrant to do for the boss afore ye kin hev this pelter. Sent me off jes' now, an' said he'd make it all right with ye."

"Ye're stuffin', feller. I jest come from whar Dan was, and he never said any such thing—was wonderin' whar ye could be."

"Now see here: I kin show ye," the horseman returned, half savagely, fumbling about his belt. "Jest wait till that feller gits by, 'cause 'tain't for every one to see."

Tom turned his head to look for the imaginary "feller," but did not see him. Mark whipped out a pistol from the borrowed belt he wore, and brought the butt of it down upon the lieutenant's cranium with force enough to have felled an ox. Seeing that the villain was effectually stunned, our hero rode on, taking care to avoid all appearance of a trail. He had scarcely ridden a dozen rods, when he came within view

of the hut where Minnie Eaton was then confined. Seeing Dan Rawlins and his confederate, the pretended Quaker, seated beside the door, very contentedly smoking their pipes, a suspicion, vague, to be sure, but very near the truth, flashed over him.

Instantly he formed a determination to investigate the matter. So great had been his success thus far that he gave no heed to the counsels of prudence. Riding into the forest till he found a favorable opportunity for concealing his animal, he tied him securely to a sapling, and then hurriedly retraced his steps. He approached the building carelessly, yet managing to keep upon the side opposite the door.

Drawing aside the vines from one of the loop-holes, he cautiously applied his eye, and gave several furtive glances into the very room which contained his heart's idol. But, the gloom within was so great that he could not distinguish objects, and thinking the apartment might be empty, he moved around the corner, to gather what he could of any conversation passing between Dan and his accomplice. The first words he understood warned him of danger.

"Thar comes Tom Millen," he heard Dan say. "Wonder what brings him back ag'in! Suthin' ain't right."

Mark knew very well that something was *not* right, and he knew what that something was. He rose quickly and glided away, but before he reached cover he was espied, and the three villains darted in pursuit, calling upon him to stop. These oft-repeated commands he had no intention of obeying. His hopes of safety lay in reaching the horse, and to that end he strained every muscle. Grasping a knife in his right hand, with which to cut the halter, he dashed into the thicket where he had left the animal, scarcely fifty paces in advance of his pursuers.

Here a new experience awaited him. No horse was to be seen! Possibly he had been mistaken. Rapidly he glanced to right and left, but no; *there* was the sapling to which the animal had been tied! Stunned by the discovery, so utterly unlooked-for, he stood for a moment dismayed.

His pursuers saw his dilemma, and with shouts pressed onward. Acting upon a rash impulse, Mark placed the knife between his teeth, and drawing a pistol in each hand, turned

upon the two. He had no idea of dallying for a moment with the base men, who would instantly sacrifice him, he doubted not. Already he was taking a deliberate aim at one of them, when a shout and rush from behind disturbed his purpose.

Seeing that he was beset by an equal number upon each side, his movement was to turn and present a pistol in either direction. A single weapon in the hands of a resolute man will often sway numbers, and so it was in this case. No one cared to rush upon tolerably certain death, and none dared to fire, through danger of hitting their companions opposite. But, soon, the three who had come up in the rear began to spread like a fan, and could thus shoot the young man with ease.

This would not do, and, rendered desperate by his situation, Mark endeavored to fire at one of them. But the faithless weapon only snapped. One of the outlaws fired, his ball striking and shattering Morton's other pistol. He had still one in his belt, but before it could be produced five of the desperadoes were upon him, the Quaker, as became his peaceful professions, remaining at a distance.

Although the young scout fought valiantly, numbers prevailed. He was thrown to the earth and bound, but not until one of the assailing party had received an ugly cut, and another been laid low by a blow from a pistol-stock.

CHAPTER IX.

IN TROUBLE.

"WAL, cap'n, what'll we do with the feller?" Tom Millen demanded, after seeing the supposed Seth's hands bound, and his weapons taken away.

"I'd advise ye to punis' the feller enuff so's to make an example for the rest," was the careless reply. "But it's a fuss of yer own, and I've other fish to fry, so I'll leave ye to fix it up any way it seems best tew ye."

"I'll bet I'll make an example of him!" the fellow hissed, wiping away the blood which trickled from a wound upon his head. "Fooled old Tom, did ye; and knocked him over, hay? Oh, wal, my time's come now, and I'll pay ye all up, principal and interest!"

The party now divided; Dan and Oliver taking their way back to the hut from which they came, the wounded drawing themselves off in another direction, with many groans and imprecations, while Tom Millen and his confederate each took the young man by a shoulder, and led him back very nearly in the direction whence he had come.

Very fortunately for Mark, he had not been recognized. None of the party save Dan knew him, and the latter had not particularly noticed his features, supposing him to be the person he represented. So neither of the others had examined him closely, never dreaming that he was other than Seth. Yet if he were taken into a large gathering of the outlaws, the deception would be discovered, his identity established, and no doubt he would be sacrificed at once, upon some pretext or another. He had no idea of giving up the struggle thus. He had really outwitted them once, and felt it could be done again. Yet any thing of this kind must be done soon, if at all.

Accordingly, no sooner was he alone with his two guards, than he began to work upon the string which confined his hands. It was a small cord, very tightly drawn, and but for the peculiar shape of his wrists he would have experienced great difficulty in freeing himself. But, after a variety of attempts he succeeded in drawing forth one hand. The rest was only a momentary task, and before the captors suspected any thing of the kind the cord was lying far behind them.

The moment for action had come.

"Look ahire," Mark demanded, stopping suddenly, and speaking in his natural tones, "do you know *who* you're taking off in this kind of way?"

Something in the tones startled Tom Millen. He stepped back, surprised at the challenge, but a blow from the youth's fist laid him prone and almost senseless upon the earth. His companion snatched a pistol, but it was quickly dashed from his hand, and he lay beside his master. Mark could have

slain both of the men, but being confident of escape without blood-shedding, he refrained from killing them.

Snatching a knife and pistol from their belts, he transferred them to his own as he ran, glancing at the sun to make certain that he was taking a general direction toward the settlements.

For a mile or more he pursued a straightforward course, never pausing or turning, but leaping obstacles, avoiding thickets, and scaling precipices. At length he ceased his more desperate efforts. His strength had been severely tested by the ordeals through which he had passed in the last twenty-four hours, and this sharp run was telling upon him. If he could, in any way, avoid pursuit, it would be better than to attempt any trial of swiftness with fresh runners.

He had heard the shrill whistle of alarm given by Tom and his companion, almost at the moment of leaving them, and long before this he had expected to hear the sounds of pursuit. But as yet he saw nothing, heard nothing, to indicate that he was followed. For some minutes he continued to make his way more slowly onward, and still all remained quiet. Hope was rising within him.

Yet, even while the youth was flattering himself that no decided pursuit had been attempted, a sharp whistle from the right was answered by others from the front and rear.

He was surrounded—outgeneraled!

As the upstarting forms appeared, he saw that there was one opening through which he could dart, and if he should elude those in pursuit, it was possible he might find a hiding-place. Turning sharp to the left, he struck up toward the mountains, followed by a loud yell, and several rifle-shots, from his pursuers. But, the bullets were sent too hastily to do harm, and the cries only posted the young man more fully as to the number and position of his foes. The mountains, as he well knew, were full of rock-bound retreats, and if no fresh pursuers made their appearance, he was hopeful of being able to give them the slip among those towering fastnesses.

Weary to complete exhaustion, Mark at length paused in the midst of a wild maze, embosomed among rocks upon rocks, overgrown, and, in places, nearly concealed by rank

bushes and vines. Dark, fearful-looking chasms lay all around, and even the daring refugee felt a chill of horror as he contemplated the scene. He had never seen—never even dreamed of any thing so wild and gloomy.

The pursuit still continued, but the villains seemed to have lost the trail, and were much scattered. Yet the youth could still hear their signals down the mountain-side, and knew there was no security for him until he should find a hiding-place. Dashing away the perspiration, which trickled in miniature rivulets down his face, he peered about for such a retreat as he sought.

"I have it!" he exclaimed, a moment later. "Just the place, as I'm a sinner!"

A dark, gloomy chamber lay before him, hollowed out of the mountain-side, and sinking perpendicularly some fifteen feet. It was more than half as wide at the mouth, and gaping recesses spoke unmistakably of extensive caverns beyond.

Grasping a strong vine, Mark swung himself down to the bottom of the chasm.

"Good! Now I'm safe!" he exclaimed. "The sunlight never penetrates here, and I'm to blame if—"

Hark! What was that?

A dozen sharp hisses—as many quick rattles—reached the ears of the fugitive, borne upon a fetid and oppressive air.

"Great God, have mercy!"

He had thrown himself into a den of rattlesnakes!

Upon every side the dreadful monsters are crawling forth by scores. Their hideous bodies look dark and shiny in the subdued light of the place. Sharp rattles fall upon the ears of the horror-frozen intruder, and the deadly hissing is unbroken!

A quick glance convinced him of the hopelessness of his situation. The monsters were almost touching him upon every side; the least movement would provoke the death-wound. He could not ascend the vine by which he had reached his present position; he could neither advance nor retreat. There was no help, no hope. He must await his fate in silence, and without motion.

He endeavored to raise his thoughts to heaven, but for a

moment the rush of frenzied feeling was too great for his control. He strove in vain to be calm. Past and present seemed mingled in a fearful discord. But this confusion was only momentary. Out of the chaos came one question which he could not settle, and the only one which gave him real pain.

Where was the maiden he loved? How would his death affect her? Was she in the power of the vile being through whose agency he was driven forth to such a horrid fate?

It was a dreadful thought, and one he could not dismiss. The image of the poor girl seemed before him, calling him to her aid. By a powerful effort of the will he succeeded in putting away the specter, and once again, with better success, endeavored to prepare himself for the awful death which stared him in the face.

But the serpents reserved their venom. Only the horror-chill, which prevented Mark from moving, after the discovery of his situation, saved him for a moment. For long minutes those hundreds of deadly fangs were in readiness to give the death-stroke. The least movement upon the part of the victim would have insured his destruction. But, he *did not* move, and one by one the monsters withdrew into their rocky fastness.

Was it merely fortune that saved the young man? Was not his scarcely-breathed prayer heard and answered?

It was some time before Mark became aware that their snakeships were really taking leave of him. How many minutes it may have been does not matter. Each separate moment was an age of suspense and horror. But, when he did realize that such was the fact, a marked change came over the young man. Sweat started from every pore, rolling in heavy, beaded masses from face and hands; his limbs trembled, so that it was with the utmost difficulty he could stand. But for his resolute will he must have fallen to the earth, and that fall would have been certain death.

Gathering all his remaining strength into one convulsive effort, he clambered up the vine, passing from death unto life, as it seemed, with the movement.

He heard a commotion below. The snakes evidently were as much surprised by the sudden appearance and retreat of

the intruder, as that personage was horrified to find himself in their secret retreat. The inmates of the den relapsed again into their usual quiet, and the youth, with the first realization of his safety, sunk upon the ground, unable to move or think. The dreadful scene had been too much for even his iron nerves.

Within a minute afterward a human form approached the spot, cautiously gliding from tree to tree with the appearance of wily strategy, regarding the prostrate scout, meantime, with great curiosity. A quick signal had notified others, and they were rushing to the place, anxious to secure the prey, yet dreading the prowess of the man they were hunting.

"I say, Bob," broke in the foremost, to Bob Higgins, who was stealing up in his rear, "I dew say, Bob, suthin's happen tew the feller; he wouldn't lay that way, 'less."

"Then why don't ye go up and see? If he's broke down he won't hurt anybody."

"Then go ahead, Bob."

"No, blast my eyes if I will! He's a feller what's full o' shines—slippery as an eel. Besides, he's your prize, for you found him. So go up and take him."

"Wal, look here, Bob. You cock your gun, and keep a good bead drawed on the feller. I'll go right up and make a prisoner of him."

Higgins did as requested, and the other, making a great show of bravery, marched forward, calling upon Mark to surrender. Receiving no answer, and feeling a momentary glow of brute courage, the fellow ventured to place his hand upon the prostrate man's shoulder. In a moment he realized that there was nothing to fear from the scout's resistance.

"Hello, here, boys! Come and see what's the matter with the feller," the rascal sung out. "I knew he was dead, or suthin' of that nater!"

Thus assured, the half-dozen horse-thieves assembled around the unconscious prisoner, and a spirited discussion took place as to how he should be disposed of. There seemed an utter diversity of opinions upon the subject, no two really agreeing as to what should be done with him.

"Let's send the feller home, whar he belongs," urged the most moderate of the party. "I'm sure he never hurt me,

and I don't like the idee of killin' men when thar's no need o' it."

" You're a fool!" broke in another. " Put the feller out of the way whar he lays; that's a look o' bizness to it. Jest think. Ondly takes a charge o' powder, or the cut of somebody's knife. Easiest way in the world for us, and sartinly the easiest for him!"

" See here, the feller is my prisoner," the foremost of the capturers exclaimed; " but I'm willin' tew vote on the matter. I say take him back to the 'Cub.'"

A vote was taken, after some trouble, when three men decided in handing him over to Dan Rawlins. Two would have killed him on the spot, while one was for giving him liberty. Angry expostulations followed, but as the single voter finally united with the majority, the bloodthirsty ones were forced to acquiesce.

The prisoner was bound securely, and when he had gained sufficient consciousness the party set off toward the haunts of the Horse-Shoe Band.

CHAPTER X.

DAN SETTLES THINGS.

MARK MORTON was forced to exert himself to the utmost in order to keep pace with his vengeful, exultant captors. Many a time it seemed he *must* sink to the earth; that poor, worn humanity could struggle no longer. But, he felt that inability to keep upon his feet would be the signal for his instant death, and so he struggled on.

How changed his emotions as he noticed the landmarks he had passed during his rapid flight. Then he was struggling for freedom, with a heart full of hope; now he was a captive, doomed to what? Death, perchance! He could scarcely doubt that the man who would commit murder in one form would do it in another.

Dan Rawlins had attempted his life a few days before when

he had comparatively nothing at stake. Was it probable that he would ever again allow the young man to go free, with such a knowledge of his villainy?

The young scout thought not. Indeed, he had no doubt that he should be sacrificed to insure the safety of the robber-band. Still, he did not despair. He was more determined than before to make his escape, if death was not immediate. The good-fortune which had attended his efforts in that direction heretofore, gave him strong hopes for the future. Even in those moments when peril seemed most imminent, had his life been preserved, as by the hand of God himself. He did not consider the danger he might be in, for that was the dark side upon which he did not care to look.

The party paused as they neared the haunts of the robber-band, and dispatched a messenger for Dan. The youth availed himself of the opportunity to rest, and never was repose more grateful to a wearied frame.

The sun was sinking behind the western mountains, and already the horizon was filling with dark, floating clouds, casting a heavy shadow over the forest the moment the sunlight was shut out. The night would most certainly be dark, perhaps stormy—just what the young man would desire most of all, if he could find any means of escaping his persecutors.

Dan Rawlins had just concluded a quiet smoke, during which he had flattered himself that every thing was moving remarkably in accordance with his wishes, when the messenger came, bringing the strange intelligence that he whom he had supposed Seth Bushby was none other than the prisoner from the store-room. He started at the announcement, but resumed his calmness when assured that the fellow had been caught again.

"By the great dragon!" he exclaimed, as he smote his big fists together, "it's a lucky thing for us that he didn't get clean away; for if he had, all the pains I've taken here would have gone for nothin'. I'll go up myself, this time, and see what the thing means. Pity if that place ain't strong enough to hold the fellow till we git ready to let him go."

So the master-spirit of the horse-thieves set out. On the way he asked many questions regarding the escape of the

young man, his subsequent recapture, and whether he seemed to have any idea of the direction of Jackson.

But Dan got no satisfaction from the answers of the fellow. It was quite evident that Mark knew tolerably well where he was, and altogether too much in regard to the gang.

"I wish the catamounts had him. I don't want his life on my hands now; but if it's got tew be done for my own safety, it won't dew to grumble over it. I dew think the chap is kind o' honest, and wouln't wrong a feller if he could help it; but, that makes no difference. Matters have gone so fur, and I've so nighly got hold of the gal, that *he* mustn't stan' in my way. Nobody'll ever be any the wiser as tew what's become of him—"

And here the schemer ceased speaking, wisely keeping the balance of his thoughts to himself.

"I s'pose you blinded him?" Dan asked, as they neared the gang.

"No, sir, we never thought of that."

"Just as well; only I don't care to hev the fellow know me. I'll jest fix up a bit."

He produced a partial disguise, which he adopted, and assuming a gait quite unlike his own, stalked into the midst of the motley gang. But the men had anticipated the wishes of their leader, and blindfolded the prisoner, blaming themselves that it had not been done before.

Dan was not disposed to find fault. He was too glad to gain possession of the young man again to chide any who had taken a part in bringing him back. He led the way toward the natural vault where he had been confined, and the party, escorting their prisoner, followed at a little distance.

Procuring a torch near the place, and means of lighting it, Dan cautiously raised the trap, and prepared to descend. A loud groan and smothered exclamation from below, as he stepped upon the stairs, sent him back again much quicker than he had made the descending movement.

"Who's thar?" he demanded, holding his guilty head so that no reckless pistol-shot should damage it.

"It's me, Seth Bushby."

"What are ye doin' down thar?"

"Me? Starvin' tew death—dyin' by inches!"

"How come ye down thar?"

"Don't ye know, cap'n—I guess it's you—that cuss what was down here this mornin' got the best of me, when I went tu feed him; and the long and short of it is, we swapped places!"

Dan proceeded to light his torch, and when sure that it would burn well, he descended into the vault, keeping one hand on a pistol by way of precaution; but he need not have felt any fears. The villain was alone, and had been bound so securely that he could scarcely move.

The rough rock had proved no agreeable resting-place, and after rolling and shifting for hours, he was ready to cry with impotent rage and vexation.

"Just let me loose from this, cap'n," he said, with intense satisfaction at the prospect, "and if I don't hunt all over creation but what I find that skunk and git my pay for this, then call me a hoss thief, that's all."

"Ye needn't hunt for the feller much," Dan replied, pleased now that he had found the man he wished most to see. "The boys hev got the feller right here, and hey come to put him in this very place ag'in."

"Look here, cap'n," the fellow remarked, as he rose painfully to his feet, "ye ain't goin' tew keep shet'in' that feller up and lettin' him git away ag'in till he kills off half of us, be ye? If I had the management of him—"

"I can take care of my own affairs," interrupted Dan, with severity; "but I may want a feller tew do a job and say nothin' about it some dark night afore long. D'ye s'pose I could find any sech a one?"

There was a depth of meaning in the speaker's manner that did not escape the tool. He looked up with a sly grin, and pointed to the rocky floor.

"D'ye s'pose a feller's specially tender-hearted arter layin' on that feather-bed all day?" he demanded. "If ye've got any kind of a delekite job on hand, what ye want tew let out, give it to this chap. That's anuff, ain't it?"

"That's enough."

The two ascended to the upper air once more, Seth Bushby stretching and rubbing himself very carefully, accompanying every movement with a grunt.

"Have ye got the chap tied so he won't git loose ag'in, boys?" Dan demanded, as he reached the party who were in waiting with the prisoner.

"I tied him this time, cap," said Bob Higgins. "If he breaks halter ag'in I'll be willin' tew let him cut my throat, or any thing else he's a mind to."

But the master-villain was not satisfied till he had carefully inspected the bonds, and made sure there was no mistake; then he gave them the order to stow the prisoner away where he had been before.

"The fellow can't git away now without help," Dan remarked, after closing and fastening the door with his own hands. "If anybody helps him they'll git their necks intew a halter—that's all!"

Some of the men offered to stay and guard the place, but this was considered unnecessary; besides, it would be very uncomfortable, as there was every appearance that a storm would set in soon after dark.

Bob Higgins and Seth Bushby were requested to adjourn to the cabin where the professed hermit was keeping strict watch over the imprisoned maiden.

Dan Rawlins had the cards all played in accordance with his wishes thus far, and he was determined to win the game at a dash.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WHISKY JUG.

THE indications of a coming storm increased each moment, and there could be no doubt that it would burst with wild fury when it came. Dan seated himself in the door of the cabin, and conversed confidentially with Oliver Rounds for some time.

At length the matter seemed discussed to their satisfaction. Repairing to the rough closet, Rounds produced a jug of whisky, from which the two drank their fill. After the

attendant villains had likewise deluged themselves the jug was replaced, and the repository closed.

By this time the wild howling of the wind began to announce the speedy coming of the expected tempest. Dan placed a bit of fragrant root in his mouth, the chewing of which would neutralize the rank fumes of the liquor he had drank, and then stepped out to view the dusky prospect. Very soon he returned, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"Just the thing!" he repeated, ardently. "Goin' tew hev a *ga-lo-ri-ous* old storm; so the gal can't have any excuse for wantin' tew leave. Shall have tew trespass on the *horse-*pitality of my kind friend the Quaker another night. Deuced sorry, but then, thar ain't no help for it!"

He turned to enter the apartment where Minnie was confined, but paused before reaching the door,

"Jest one more swig of that *tea*," he remarked, "and then I'm all right for business."

The "swig," which was a liberal one, was taken, and then he placed the jug upon the floor.

"Help yerselves, my fellers," he said. "Drink yer fill for it's goin' tew be a mighty onpleasant night out. I must go and see about gettin' me a wife!"

Leaving the lesser evil spirits to fill themselves with the fiery liquid, Dan turned away, unfastened the door of Minnie's room, and pushed his huge carcass in. For a moment after closing the door behind him all remained in darkness, the gloom of the dusky apartment being too great for his unpracticed eyes.

Meanwhile, what of poor, broken-hearted Minnie?

For some time she had remained insensible, or, rather, her distinct senses had been swallowed up in the flood of horror and fear which submerged her soul. Scarcely could she realize that all which had been thus unintentionally revealed to her was possible, after the dark vail had passed away, and left her once more conscious of her surroundings. We said "conscious."

Her brain was in a whirl; her burning gaze fixed upon vacancy; her swelling heart seemed ready to burst; even the coming and going of her breath seemed to choke and distract her.

"Can it be?"

This she asked herself. Was it possible that Dan Rawlins—the man she had looked upon as a savior, whom she had almost learned to love, and half determined to wed—was the leader of a gang of horse-thieves and desperadoes? That he had purchased her of the Indians, with whom he was doubtless in league? That he had basely murdered her true lover, and taken her into this distant, dreadful place that she might be more fully in his power?

She was still thinking of this, and trying at times to assure herself that all was a dreadful dream, when the sound of loud voices without fell upon her ears, and she pressed nearer the rude partition, to hear what might be said. She had no scruples against playing the eavesdropper now, for she knew that, if what she feared was impending, hers was a truly dreadful situation. Every word which passed between Dan and his confederates came distinctly to her ears, making that certain of which she had no doubts before.

Rising to her feet, undecided how to act, yet determined to brave all and charge him with his perfidy, she stood and confronted Dan Rawlins, as he peered about in the gloom to discover her. When he spoke it was evident he had taken at least one pull too much at the whisky-jug.

"It's too (*hic*) all-fired bad," he commenced, pointing off to the westward, whence the storm was coming, "too drefful bad, I (*hic*) say; but thar's no help (*hic*) for't. We're bound in b' (*hic*) by the weather, and we've got to 'trude on the (*hic*) on the *horsepitality* of my very dear (*hic*) dear friend Brad—(*hic*) I mean, Rounds!"

"Stop, sir!" the maiden said, in a tone which arrested the attention of even the drunken horse-thief. "I know you, villain! There is no need for you to attempt deceiving me further. Storm or no storm, I wish to go back to Fort Jackson to-night, and you will much oblige me if you will let me pass."

She moved toward the door, but the very manner in which she spoke put the villain upon his guard.

"Hold on!" he ejaculated, grasping her arm. "Don't you see thar's a drefful storm comin' up? Why, girl, (*hic*) we couldn't live an hour in it, to say nothin' of gittin' lost, and runnin' intew the Injins ag'in."

"I tell you to let me go! I would ten times rather be among the Indians than among a gang of horse-thieves. Where is your pretended honor and friendship—your love, of which you made such a profession but recently? Tell me what you have done with Mark Morton! You know that he did not leave you, as you said; but you betrayed and killed him! Out of my way, miserable villain that you are!"

Some moments of silence followed this outbreak. Dan was unprepared for any such accusation, and the whisky he had drank had bemuddled his brain so much that he knew not how to reply to these direct charges. Minnie saw the man's hesitation and quailing, which would have proved his guilt, in the absence of other evidence.

"Do not think that blood will hide your crimes," she continued, gazing him sternly in the eye. "I tell you there shall come a day of reckoning for you, and that right speedily! You may have murdered Mark."

"It's a lie, I say," he broke forth, beginning to regain his lost courage. "I never've hurt the feller—never've seen him since he left me back yender. I tell ye I du love ye, and I'm goin' to marry ye whether or no!"

The whisky had confused him so much that he had quite forgotten the proper arguments to use at this stage, and so had blundered upon the plea he had intended to use when all other efforts should fail.

"Marry you, indeed!" she retorted, turning upon him a glance before which he quailed. "I tell you, Dan Rawlins, I would sooner cut off my own head than do any such thing! I abhor you! I despise the very sight of you—murderer that you are! Go; and let me depart, also. I'll never trouble you more. If I die in the forest, or the savages kill me, I absolve you from all blame! Only let me bid farewell to this dreadful place."

"Ye kin go any time ye want to," the rascal laughed, in fiendish glee; "only when ye go 'twill be as my wife, that's all! Or, if ye like it better, thar's a jestice up in young Morton's neighborhood, and we'll go up thar. I'll find ye a hoss, and arter we're j'ined ye can go and see the feller, and find out."

"Stop, sir; I will listen to no more. Leave me!"

"Oh, ye won't listen, hey? Wal, that's funny. Don't know how ye're goin' tew help yerself. But, then, I'll be 'commerdatin', and leave ye a spell, acause I'm comin' back purty soon, and next time ye won't git red of me till to-morrer mornin'!"

He backed out of the door, leaving the poor girl half crazed with apprehension and fear. The storm had commenced in real earnest without, and as she felt the rain blown through the loop-holes, and dashed in deluges through the miserable roof, she thought how quiet it was out there in the storm, compared with the terrible tumult going on within her own brain.

Dan regained the outer apartment, and reached the whisky-jug, which stood as he had left it upon the floor. Taking a huge draught of the potent liquid, he turned to his companions.

"What d'ye think of the storm?" he asked.

"Rough," replied a single voice.

"Wal, that's jest what we want. If anybody's out o' the house to-night they'll keep close and not be watchin' other fellers. Now I want you three to go and square up accounts with that chap we put in the store-room, to-night. Dew it up in good order. You understan', Seth?"

"Guess I du, cap'n. If it stormed brimstun I'd go up and du *that* job!"

With some muttering and dissatisfaction, the others prepared to accompany him, taking a good stock of weapons, and a dark-lantern to guide their uncertain steps.

"That settles things, (*hic*) so fur as him and her is consarned," Dan muttered, as he heard them depart. "Now I'll take another sup of this, and git a bit of supper; then I'll go in and see my lady-love!"

A lighted torch, which flared fearfully in the gale, was stuck in a crevice. After reversing the jug once more, Dan selected such morsels of food as his taste preferred, though to no good result. The liquor had destroyed all appetite, and after one or two ineffectual attempts to eat, he moved to the door, that his stomach might be relieved of a portion of its unwholesome load.

Dan Rawlins was drunk, very drunk; and in less than ten

minutes he was dead-drunk—lying upon the floor in a state of total insensibility.

Hours passed. The storm raged and increased its fury, mingling thunder and lightning with the gale and deluge; but it was not till morning light broke over the forest that Dan awoke. For some time he could comprehend nothing, in full; but after a time the events of the past night returned, and he looked around for his companions. This was what he saw :

The storm was still raging. The whisky-jug was still upon the floor. The torch had burned out, very nearly setting fire to the cabin. A huge toad, anxious to escape the storm, sat inside the open door, winking and blinking.

Dan lay in the middle of the apartment, cold and alone!

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT THE STORM BROUGHT.

WHEN Minnie Eaton was left alone, after the evening visit of Dan, her first feelings were those of utter despair. No single ray of hope appeared. Although she would have dared any thing in the effort to regain liberty, she could not achieve miracles. The cabin had been thrown together roughly, almost rudely, but it was strong; so strong that her feeble strength was weakness itself when applied to the heavy timbers of the building. There she was, confined, and at the mercy of that bad man. Was it a wonder that her soul shrunk with horror?

In addition to the mental suffering she was called upon to endure, her situation was becoming fearfully unpleasant from external causes, although to these she paid little heed. The cabin roof had been composed of small poles, covered with bark and boughs; and when new had been quite secure and comfortable. But now, through many a gaping crevice the wind and rain rushed with most unpleasant force.

There was a spot peculiarly loose and open at one corner,

which would clatter fearfully at intervals, while the storm would pour in mercilessly. A man inured to hardships and peril, full of resources, would have lost no time in taking advantage of this circumstance; but Minnie was not especially skilled in strategy, and remained watching the clattering mass for many minutes before she thought that it might, in some manner, be made an auxiliary to her escape.

Finally, the thought came, and despair was cheered by gleams of hope.

Already she began to dread the return of Dan, for that he would come soon she had no doubt. The roof shook more and more. Oh, if the dark being would spare her for a few moments more, she felt that she might flee from him.

Naturally blessed with more than an ordinary share of agility, which was materially aided by her dreadful situation, she was not long in raising herself some two feet, so that her head was close to the roof. Here she waited for the movements which should give her a clue to further action. Presently it came. A portion of the roof was lifted two or three inches by the wind, and remained so for some moments.

Instantly her hand was applied beneath the mass, and her utmost strength exerted to raise it further; but in vain. Accident, however, assisted her more than reason. Her foot slipped, and she was thrown violently to the right. The movement swayed the portion of roof, and when it settled again there was an aperture more than half large enough to answer her purpose. Again and again was all her strength applied, in the same manner, until she felt sure an opening was made sufficiently large to allow of her escape.

An instant she paused, to regain breath, and nerve herself for the task she was about to undertake. She dared not delay longer, for the wind might close the opening she had made, or Dan might enter the apartment at any moment. The blast howled through the opening with fearful fury, almost taking her breath as she thrust her head out, but the heroine did not shrink. How gladly she let the tempest beat upon her unprotected head! How cheerfully she gasped for breath while the fierce rain wet her garments through in a moment! Was she not fleeing from the most dreadful fate she could picture to herself?

Then, as she realized that she was not yet free from discovery, she sprung upon the crazy roof. The structure creaked fearfully, it seemed to her, and in terror she threw herself to the ground.

Almost stunned by the fall, and confused by the furious storm beating upon her, it was some moments before she was able to gather herself up and proceed. Thankful that her attempt had not been discovered, and that she had not been injured by the fall, she rose to her feet, grasped a stout stick which she found beside her, and set forward upon her dreadful and uncertain way.

Night had now come, fully; and the storm made it intensely dark. She could not see a pace in advance, and must depend entirely upon feeling out the way, step by step. After moving a few yards, she found that only by the beams of a single torch burning inside could she locate the cabin from which she had just come. Of course it would be simply impossible for her to make out any direction, since there were no lights above nor landmarks upon the earth to guide her.

But, she made one observation, which many an older and more experienced person might have failed to do: that the wind and storm came from due west; so that, in order to make every step count in the dreadful journey she had undertaken, it would be necessary to keep it at her back. This would be very much preferable, since the force of the gale would assist her steps, instead of retarding them. If she should meet with no misfortune, the fugitive maiden calculated upon making several miles before her strength should fail, or dawn overtake her.

How long she struggled on, the maiden had no means of knowing. What distance she had traveled was still more uncertain. But, after dreadful hours of struggle her strength was utterly exhausted, and, unable to keep her feet longer, she sunk down for a brief season of rest. But she dared not pause long. The rain still fell in torrents, and heavy peals of thunder rolled overhead, following sharp flashes of lightning, which momentarily lighted up the wild scene around her.

Breathing, in thought rather than words, a brief prayer to

Him in whose hands her destiny was, the maiden once more arose to her feet, fearful of pausing any longer.

But it was not in human nature to struggle long with such difficulties as beset the poor girl. Scratched and bleeding, bruised and aching, it was little wonder that the heroic fortitude which had sustained her through such continued exertion, should finally leave her, and a natural reaction render her indifferent whether she lived or died.

The darkness, blinding rain and sweeping wind continued, but the flying Minnie had ceased her struggles. Despair had taken the place of hope, fatigue had exhausted the vigor of her young body ; and, unable to proceed further, she had laid her down to die, if death should come to her ; to suffer on, if the dark angel should not bring deliverance !

The sensations of Mark Morton upon being again placed in the prison from which he had once escaped, may be quite as well imagined as described. There was much of chagrin in his heart, although his lively hope had not deserted him, and he was fully determined not to give up until he had made the most desperate efforts to regain his liberty. He knew that the night gave promise of being dark and stormy—just the night of all others he would prefer. There remained but a single question : could he leave the place of his imprisonment ?

The foolish boast of Bob Higgins in regard to his bonds amounted to nothing, as he showed in less than five minutes after he was left alone, by stripping them off with perfect ease. There his efforts ended for the present. He was weak now, barely able to walk ; and if any serious attempt was to be made he must give several hours to rest, as a precautionary measure. Making sure of the cords which had confined him, he sat down, leaning against the stairs, and was soon sleeping as soundly as any person in his situation could sleep.

His slumber was full of horrid visions. Now he was fleeing from savage foes ; anon in the den of serpents. Every possible form of terror visited his disturbed brain, until something more intensely fearful than the others caused him to awake, with a sudden start.

For a moment after he awoke, all seemed still above and

around him. He wondered what could have disturbed him thus. Could it have been imagination only? But very soon the rolling of thunder and rush of the tempest penetrated even to his subterranean prison.

"So, it's raining," he mused. "Pretty soundly, too, or I am no judge. Well, let's see how I feel, and then for getting out of here."

He knew pretty well the nature and structure of the place where he was confined, but had, as yet, thought of no scheme promising to afford him release.

He had barely begun to reflect upon that matter, when he heard a sound from above. He paid little attention at first, supposing it the work of the storm; but a moment later the trap was raised, admitting a rush of tempest and the rays of a dark-lantern. Mark was nearly beneath the stairs at this moment, and a suspicion of the truth flashed across his mind with the appearance.

Immediately the light was lowered a little, and flashed about the apartment, but as it failed to reveal the young man, he heard a low murmur of astonishment from those above.

"Whar kin the feller hev gone?" was asked, necessarily loud enough to reach the ears of the intended victim.

"Wouldn't wonder if he's under the stairs," some one replied. "Call him, and if he makes his appearance—"

"Whar be ye, Mark?" asked a thick voice, in obedience to the behest.

But if the visitors had calculated upon calling him forth, and shooting him at the moment of appearance, they had not planned deeply enough. The prisoner remained silent, though full of impatience, and listened to the cowardly council above with feelings of disgust, not unmixed with some apprehension. He knew, now, that they had come to take his life, that there were three of them, at least, well armed; and yet they dared not descend in a body to meet him, as they supposed, bound and helpless! Oh, how he longed for a weapon that he might make a rush upon them! Desperate as the chance would be, he felt certain of vanquishing the trio without a blow.

The weapon was to be supplied—the battle fought—by a power higher than his. Even while Mark was listening to their

whispered consultation, there came a vivid flash, of which he was barely conscious, when he felt himself hurled upon the rock beneath by a force which deprived him of all consciousness for some time.

As reason began to return Mark was in some doubt whether he had been shot, or a thunderbolt had fallen so near as to produce the shock he had experienced. Presently he noticed that all was dark about him, and this fact assured him that it was to the elements, and not to horse-thieves that he owed his last bruises. He was about moving to one side, when a faint gleam near by attracted his attention. He looked closer, and saw that it was the dark-lantern, broken, but not quite extinguished. He attempted to raise it, and found by so doing that a senseless villain still held it in his grasp.

As the lantern was righted the flame revived, and Mark saw that two of his foes, whom he recognized as Seth Bushby and Bob Higgins, were piled together at the bottom of the stairs.

Flashing the rays of the lantern upward he saw a third form lying across the opening. For a moment he paused, uncertain whether it might not be a vision. But there was every assurance that all was real. A strange odor filled the place, and, partially to obtain purer air, partially to see what had taken place above, he ascended the stairs.

His first glance was at the features of the prostrate one. The disguise had been torn away, in part, yet there lay all that remained to earth of the pretended Quaker. Oliver Rounds was dead, most certainly, for Mark saw at a glance that his neck was broken; and a closer examination which he did not care to make, would have shown that nearly every joint in his body was dislocated.

A suspicion crossed the young man's mind, and directing the rays of his lantern to the spot, he saw that it was correct. A large tree, standing near by, had been struck by lightning, and numerous shreds and splinters lay strewn over the earth. The shock had precipitated the two foremost villains to the rocky vault, while the cowardly Quaker, more in the rear, had met an equally sudden and more certain fate.

Satisfied as to what was above, Mark hastened below. Of the death of those who had fallen he was not certain. Yet

if they were not dead, they seemed pretty effectually disposed of for the present. In fact he did not stop to examine closely. He felt that the blow was given by a hand more powerful than humanity, and he would neither attempt to undo nor to hasten the work. His only thought now was to leave the horrid scene before any others should be attracted to the place.

His first movement was to secure weapons. Of knives and pistols the trio had possessed any quantity, but all of the latter were wet, and a plurality of the former would serve no good purpose. He finally selected two of the pistols, which seemed least damaged, and a knife. With plenty of bullets, and some powder which had escaped the storm, he was tolerably supplied with ammunition.

He was about ascending the stairs, to embark his fortunes once more in the attempt to escape the haunts of the horse-thieves, when an idea struck him. He had already fasted longer than seemed either necessary or proper. He would be unable to obtain any food before reaching the settlements. Might he not be able to find something in the store-room which could be eaten?

There was not an article of food in the place which would be palatable in a raw state. But, another thought overcame the difficulty. By the assistance of the lantern he soon succeeded in kindling a small fire, at which he roasted some of the sweet potatoes, and broiled some generous slices of pork. Then the fire was extinguished, and the repast swallowed in a few moments.

Now that hunger was assuaged he felt better and stronger. Nothing seemed to promise adversely to his success at present, and with hopes bounding high he ascended the stairs, leading forth to storm and tempest, but also to freedom from a vile incarceration.

Mark little heeded the commotion of the elements. It served, rather, to strengthen and invigorate his worn frame. Casting a single glance about upon the evidences of his strange deliverance, he lifted up a hasty thanksgiving, and set forward; shaping his course, as Minnie had done, by the direction of the storm.

base tales, and other small dangers were about him; but he was not so much as to give up his courage and nerve, and did his best to meet his fate with a manly spirit.

CHAPTER XIII.

FEARS AND HOPES.

DISREGARDING the varied obstacles in his pathway, Mark Morton pushed onward, with a brave heart. Now falling forward at full length in the mud; now caught by an unseen limb and thrown prostrate upon his back, he still laughed at the ill-chances, and felt his way forward. He was simply determined that morning light, when it came to reveal his escape, should find him so far from the haunts he was leaving that no attempt at pursuit would be of any avail.

While he was still plodding along, congratulating himself upon his good-fortune, he stumbled over something lying in his way. His foot slipped in the soft soil, and he fell prone beside it. Giving utterance to a quick exclamation, he was about springing to his feet again, when a low gasp from the object arrested his attention, at the same time thrilling him with horror. Very evidently he had stumbled upon some human being, and at the moment he felt that it must be one of his enemies. Yet it was soon evident that if such was the case he had nothing to fear from the person beside him.

Placing his hand upon the object, he became satisfied that it was in fact a human being. The hair, too, was long and flowing, evidently that of a woman! The features were also feminine; but, whether they belonged to white or Indian, he had no means of ascertaining. Scarce had he made these discoveries when a flash of lightning illuminated the forest. It was very brief, however, and before he could fix his eyes upon the features of the person all was darkness again.

Patiently he waited for a repetition of the light. Anxious as he was to improve every moment, he would not proceed and leave this poor woman to die, were she friend or foe. It seemed the lightning would never come again; but at length a fierce glow lighted up the sky and forest.

Why did the young man's heart give one convulsive throb, and then stand still, as though its work was done forever?

It was his own adored Minnie who lay there, calm and white, as though the grim messenger had come and summoned away her spirit !

For a moment he stood shocked and stunned. He knew not what to do.

Then he raised her in his arms, pressing her convulsively to his breast, kissing her pallid lips passionately, as he exclaimed :

"Minnie, Minnie, my darling ; do you know me ? your own Mark ?"

There was a low, faint gasp, but no audible response.

He repeated the question, again and again, passionately, as though the very fervor of his emotion must waken her to life once more.

"Who are you ? Oh, leave me here, I am resting *so* easy," she gasped, finally, at the same time making a movement as though to disengage herself from his embrace.

But the effort was weak, and the next moment she lay back senseless and motionless ; a dead weight in his arms.

"It is I, your own Mark Morton !" he repeated, with intonations of love and anxiety, bending close to her face, and pressing her to his heart.

But, she gave no answer, or any further signs of life.

Again he besought her to speak to him, assuring her that he had come to save her from further peril and danger. Still the cold, heavy weight lay in his arms, and no sign of life, not a breath or movement, denoted that he held any thing beside a corpse !

Suddenly the heavens were lighted up with a broad glare, which rendered every thing distinct as at noonday, for some moments.

Mark caught another view of the features, but they were pallid and deathlike. His anxiety now became agony. Surely nothing could be more unpleasant than the dilemma in which he was placed. All his efforts to restore consciousness to the senseless form were of no avail ; yet there were unmistakable evidences that she still lived. In the darkness and storm he could not carry her from the spot ; leave her where she was he would not. Only the chance presented, then, of remaining with her, attempting to bring her back to life again,

and meeting any fate, if he could not protect her from harm.

With this purpose in view he waited for a momentary illumination, that he might select some place less exposed to the storm than they now occupied.

When it came he saw a wide-spreading oak near by, standing upon a gentle rise of ground. This seemed the very place he sought, since the higher land would not be likely to form that *paste* of clay which rendered the whole region about them so unendurable, at every fall of rain.

Struggling along with his burden, Mark was pleased to find his wishes realized, and that they were less exposed to the fury of the elements—the great oak breaking off the tempest, and pouring down the rain-drops from its leaves more gently. Here he placed the senseless Minnie upon the dryer earth, and recommenced his exertions to restore her to consciousness.

A dreadful fear, which he dared not confess to himself, lay at the young man's heart, and the longer he toiled with no signs of success, the heavier it weighed. Hope at length became hued with despair. It could scarcely be that the current of life, so long delayed, would flow again.

At length, at last! A gentle sigh, which none but the ears of love could have detected in the louder sighing of the tempest, gave him renewed strength, and in a moment the pulses of life were throbbing again. But, the beating of the maiden's heart did not strengthen more perceptibly than that of the man who stood so anxiously waiting the issue. How impatiently he waited the next flash of light, which should reveal to him the reanimated features of his beloved!

"Where am I?" a faint voice asked.

"Here; safe!" was returned, most intensely.

"Who are you? Do my ears deceive me?"

"Not if they tell you that I am your own Mark."

"Then you are still alive? Thank the Lord for that!"

"You did not suppose me dead?"

"I was afraid you were. But, tell me, how came you here?"

"I will tell you soon. Not now; it is too long a story. But, tell me, how do you feel, my own dear Minnie?"

"I can not tell. I feel very strangely, but I suppose that

is quite natural. I am sure I am not very sick—not *sick at all.*"

"How came you away here, in this wild place, and in such a condition?" Mark asked, unable longer to keep back his hearty curiosity.

"That is a long story, too. All I can tell you is that I was trying to run away—"

"From whom?"

"From Dan Rawlins and his gang. I went as far as I could, and then lay down to die; for I hoped to die rather than to fall into his hands again. I am strong enough to go on. Let us hasten away from this horrid place, for daylight will surely bring pursuit."

"Do not fear now, my brave girl. While life remains I will protect you."

They could not move in the darkness with any degree of certainty. Of course there would be no pursuit while night lasted, since the horse-thieves would be quite unable to follow any trail. At the coming of dawn the fugitives would be able to set forth again, and with moderate good-fortune, Mark spoke confidently of reaching Fort Jackson in a few hours.

Till the coming of light, it was thought best to remain where they were. Neither of them had a blanket or over-garment of any kind, so that sleeping would be quite out of the question. But this fact neither of them regretted very much. There were many things of which they could converse, for the past two days had been full of strange experiences for both of them.

First, Minnie gave her adventures. Commencing with the attack upon her father's cabin, she related all that had transpired up to the moment when she had lost her consciousness in the forest, which could have been but a few minutes before Mark stumbled upon her. True, she did not, at that time, speak of the ardor with which Dan had pressed his suit; neither did she acknowledge how nearly she had been made to fall into the trap.

But, now that her own experience had been related, the maiden was more than anxious to hear the particulars of her lover's adventures meantime, and with her earnest solicitation he finally complied.

Commencing at the meeting with Dan in the forest, with which we opened this narrative, he graphically described all that had taken place, in the order of succession. It was a thrilling story, which made the listener's heart beat faster at each scene of peril, until, when it was ended, she exclaimed :

"How strange, how providential, that you should be thus preserved to meet me here in the wilderness and storm, and save my life! It seems almost impossible that any one could have passed through so many dreadful adventures and live!"

"Minnie," the youth said, with deep tenderness in his tones, "we have been spared through many strange scenes, when nothing but a purpose of Providence could have kept us. Something must be intended for us. Why have we been preserved if not for each other? Shall it not be so? If we are spared to each other till the proper moment comes, will you be my own dear wife?"

Minnie neither fainted, screamed, struggled nor equivocated. Her heart had been his for a long time, and she did not hesitate to answer his question with a simple "yes!" True, the fortunes of her whole life hung upon that simple word, but no matter: she felt that she was not deceived, and with the strong arm which supported her for a life-stay, she felt she should be superlatively happy.

Mark planted his back against the great tree, and drawing the head of his betrothed down upon his shoulder, they sat there talking and thinking, till the gray light of morning began to appear in the east.

Although the storm still continued, it had lost much of its force, and the lovers felt that they should make good progress, now that they had daylight to reveal their path, and less of the storm to contend with.

Both were quite hungry—Minnie not having eaten anything since her dinner of the day before. Mark blamed himself that he had not taken a small quantity of provisions from the thieves' store-room; but it was too late to mend the matter, and with a laugh at their peculiar situation, which their success thus far warranted them in indulging, they prepared to resume their journey.

Very simple was the preparation. Mark climbed the tree under which they had been reposing, and endeavored to make

out some landmark which might serve as a guide to them. In this he was but partially successful. True, there was a slight elevation of land some miles beyond, and behind this he believed Fort Jackson to lie; but even of this he was not certain.

Descending from the elevated perch, he examined his pistols carefully, to make sure of their condition. One of them was perfectly wetted, and quite useless at present. The other seemed entirely dry. Brushing out the pan of this, he renewed the priming, and placed it carefully in his belt. Then taking Minnie's hand, the twain set forth upon their perilous and uncertain journey.

A few minutes' walk convinced them that their task was any thing but easy, even under the full light of day. The clayey soil was so soaked that it adhered to their feet in large masses, and rendered their footing quite insecure, even when upon their guard. Besides, the land was low, and at places there were deep sloughs, capable of ingulfling the incautious pedestrian in a moment. To avoid these and pick their way along through the tenacious mud was slow and wearisome work. They had not traveled more than a mile when the sun burst through the breaking clouds, sending floods of golden light dancing through the forest.

"Glory!" Mark exclaimed, impulsively. "The storm is over! See how the clouds are breaking up. So are better days coming to us!"

But the maiden lifted a finger in warning, and bent her head to listen.

"What is it? Do you hear any thing suspicious?" he asked, alarmed at his incaution.

"Hark! There! Don't you hear it?"

Mark did hear; but it was not a sound to cause alarm. Only the cry of some one in distress, hoarse and almost indistinguishable. The voice seemed to be directly in their path, and not very distant.

"Come, come," said the maiden, shivering with nervous dread. "Let us go off this way. It may be some trap for us—we know not what it is."

"True," returned the young man; "it may be that, though I think not. I feel more inclined to think it some one in

distress, whom I can assist. Do you hide in yonder bunch of bushes, while I go and see what it is."

"Oh, don't; please don't venture near it," she pleaded. "I am so afraid something will happen to us!"

"I will be very careful about that. But there is the call again. It would be wrong for me to pass by, when I could perhaps save the life of a human being. I must go and see, though I will be very careful about it."

Minnie raised no further objections, for she knew that his reasoning was just, while the feeling which prompted her to leave a fellow-being in distress, perchance, was a very selfish one. So she sought the shelter he had pointed out, and waited impatiently for his return. But when what seemed a long time passed, and he came not, she began to fear that he had fallen into some trap, after all. Else, why should he be away so long, with nothing to indicate the cause of his absence?

After leaving Minnie, Mark moved away nearly in the direction of the sounds which they had heard. As he approached, the cries still continued. He was now almost certain that they could only come from a human being in distress. In this portion of the forest there was a considerable abundance of undergrowth, so that the scout had no difficulty in keeping concealed as he approached.

At length he gained the place whence it seemed the sounds must have proceeded, but saw nothing to indicate the source of them. Thinking that the being must have moved away, he listened for a moment, but hearing no further cries, was upon the point of returning to Minnie, when he chanced to look upon the ground close beside him. Here he saw something. The first object was a half-grown cub, partially concealed by some bushes, which had been killed by a human being, as its throat was cut from ear to ear. Close to it was something more.

Rising above the surface of a "slough," was a head, shoulders, and a pair of arms!

Reader, imagine, protruding from the ground, an Indian visage, distorted with horror, and its naturally savage expression heightened by the use of a liberal quantity of war-paint, with outstretched hands wildly grasping the soft mud, and

you have something of an idea of what appeared to the astounded scout.

For a moment the young man stood gazing at the strange spectacle, almost unable to comprehend what his eyes saw. Then he began to look about for some means of assisting the unfortunate savage from his unpleasant predicament. True, it was one of the race with whom he had lately been at enmity; whose cheeks were still daubed with the hideous war-paint, and without doubt, one of the party whose fiendish doings had brought all the present trouble upon himself and Minnie. Possibly if he were rescued from the unpleasant situation he would repay the kindness with treachery. But Mark could not entertain the idea of leaving a human being to die in such a horrible manner.

To his disappointment he found nothing with which to assist the struggling savage, and he could not venture within reach of him without sharing his fate. As he turned again to the place he saw that the Indian was sinking. The mud already touched his chin, and only face and hands remained above the surface! In a few minutes it would be too late to render him any assistance.

But a large oak grew near, a heavy lateral branch of which overspread the place. Bethinking himself of the cords about his waist, Mark produced them, and found that when tied together they would answer his purpose quite well. Then mounting the tree and pushing his way out along the limb till he was directly over the sinking native, he threw down one end of the cord.

The savage had evidently feared the white man more than he hoped for his assistance; but at this proof of his good intentions the dusky features lighted up with a ray of gladness, and he grasped the cord with unmistakable energy. Yet it was vain, for at the slightest pull it slipped from his nerveless grasp, and the expression of hope faded away into one of savage despair.

CHAPTER XIV.

SCARCELY SAFE.

NOTICING the expression upon the Indian's face, Mark soon prepared a noose in one end of the cord, after which he sung out, in cheery though cautious tones:

"Hold on a moment, red-skin, and I'll bring you out of that easy enough. I've a noose here that'll do the job. Put your hands together in this way, and let the cord over to your wrists. Then keep it there until I get it pulled snug, and out you will come!"

The Indian attempted to speak, but if he knew any English he was too deep in the mud to make it intelligible. Yet he placed his hands as directed, and by reaching as low as possible, Mark was able to get the noose into place. Then he pulled carefully till it was taut, and the Indian's arms came out of the mud. He was now prepared for the principal effort, and after bracing himself as securely as possible upon the limb, he began to pull.

The savage made several wry faces, as the cord became exquisitely tight about his wrists. Still, he did not complain, but looked exceedingly gratified for the aid thus unexpectedly vouchsafed him. The first effort raised him three or four inches, while a second and third pull followed with like results. But here, most unexpectedly, the cord parted, leaving the Indian with his body half drawn forth.

But Mark at once leaped down, and hastened to the assistance of the sinking native. Finding a footing from which he could reach the Indian's hands, he relaxed not his efforts till the mud-dripping savage stood beside him.

"The pale-face has saved Ti-no-de-ga's life," the chief said, brokenly; "red-man no forget."

"How did you happen in such a place as that?" the youth asked.

In very poor English, and with much hesitation and repetition, the old chief told his story. It seemed that he had

been abroad the afternoon previous, and near night had killed a cub, which he had undertaken to carry to camp. Darkness came on, however, and he was forced to encamp alone. With the earliest beams of light he had attempted to pursue his way, but walked unintentionally into the mud-slough, where he became hopelessly mired. He had called, hoping some of his people would hear him, and come to his assistance. Instead came the stranger from whom he had, at first, expected to receive his speedy death-wound. In conclusion he repeated his protestations of eternal friendship for Mark, and in evidence thereof gave the young man a peculiar string of beads, which he assured him would insure protection to the bearer from any of the tribe whom he might encounter.

Mark having intimated that he was hungry, Ti-no-de-ga insisted upon dressing and dividing the young bear with him, as soon as they repaired to a creek near by, and freed their persons of the mud with which each was plentifully bedaubed.

The youth would have preferred a slice of the meat, and liberty to depart at once, for he had already been absent some time, and knew Minnie would feel alarmed on his account. But seeing no way of ending his dilemma, short of letting his friend into his secret, he briefly related that a maiden of his race was in his company, and would fear that harm had befallen him if he stayed away longer. The chief remained in a state of meditation for a few moments after the young man ceased, and then lifted his eyes with a frank expression.

"Ti-no-de-ga is not a pale-face," he said, earnestly. "He does not steal horses. He will not speak double. Let the pale-face maiden come and eat with her brother and the red chief."

Feeling that any show of hesitation on his part would indicate a want of confidence in his red companion, Mark departed at once to bring the maiden, leaving Ti-no-de-ga to build the fire and roast the meat.

Minnie's anxiety had reached a pitch where it must speedily become unbearable, and she was upon the point of giving way to utter despair, when the object of her solicitude reappeared. She rose with a glad exclamation, and hastened to meet him, gathering from his assured looks that all was right.

"Oh, Mark!" she exclaimed, "I am glad you have come!"

I was becoming very frightened! What was the trouble that detained you so long?"

"I think it something that may be very fortunate for us," he said, proceeding to relate his recently experienced adventure, and producing the string of beads given him by the chief. "He is building a fire," he added, in conclusion, "and we've some nice young bear-meat to broil. I'm sure you'll not refuse a slice. There's a spring near, too, where you can quench your thirst, and a creek where you can remove some of this outer coating of mud."

Trembling with nervous fears, and the dread recollections which the presence of the Indian brought up, the maiden consented to accompany her lover, and together they moved down to the creek. They could see a faint blue smoke rising up, which indicated that the efforts of the chief in the way of preparing a breakfast were meeting with success.

He rose with a peculiar smile; one that might be termed very genial when we consider that it came from an Indian chief. Advancing to meet the refugees he extended a hand to each. He regarded the maiden closely, and held her hand for a moment after releasing that of her companion.

"Ti-no-de-ga will not hurt a friend," he said, reading her fears despite her efforts to conceal them.

Kneeling by the spring Minnie took a deep draught of its pure, clear water, which had not suffered discoloration from the storm. The pure elixir seemed to revive her much, and while Mark assisted in broiling the bear's meat, she busied herself in removing the mud which had so long held undisputed possession of her garments.

After the food had been disposed of Ti-no-de-ga rose and presented Minnie with a string of beads similar to those he had given the youth. She understood the motive, and thanked him for the gift, which she placed about her neck, feeling far different in regard to the chief from what she had felt an hour previous.

The chief was not satisfied with thus providing for the safety of his white friends, but drew Mark aside and spoke of the "pale squaw" who was still a prisoner in his camp, and gave a solemn promise that she should be sent under the guard of a party of braves to the vicinity of Fort Jackson.

Surprised at this unexpected turn of affairs, Mark would have overwhelmed the speaker with expressions of gratitude; but the latter waved him back, grasped his portion of meat, and turned into the forest, saying, in a lofty tone:

"Ti-no-de-ga is a warrior—he does not forget a friend!"

The lovers stood watching the strange Indian as he moved from sight, and when his tall form had disappeared the young man turned to Minnie.

"What do you think of my enterprise, now?" he asked.

"If that man is true to his word I have no reason to be dissatisfied," she replied, with a smile.

As they recommenced their journey, it was with far different feelings from those they had experienced two hours previous. Renewed in strength, with appetites satisfied, and their persons freed of the mud which had clung to them, they really felt like different beings. Bright and lively hope had taken the place of fear and doubt. They scarcely heeded the pliant soil beneath their feet, and when the storm ceased utterly, and they saw the bright sunshine gladden the earth, outward nature was faithfully mirrored in their hearts.

But they had not yet reached a place of entire safety. There were many and peculiar dangers about them which they scarcely thought of. Indeed, so providential had seemed their fate thus far, that it may well be supposed they were getting just a trifle careless.

"Look yonder, Mark!" Minnie exclaimed, stopping short and catching her companion by the arm. "I certainly saw two Indians pass between those evergreens. There, don't you see them? They are going to the south."

"Never fear the red-men," he laughed. "You know we have charms that will work wonders over their simple minds!"

And he shook the chain of beads carelessly.

"Yes, I know. But then, it is better that we keep clear of them, if possible. See, there are two more, and they are coming right this way. Let us hide!"

Mark saw the two Indians, and although he did not feel the fears of Minnie, he would have allowed her to seek cover, had it not been quite too late. Already they were discovered, and the Indians were coming down on them rapidly.

Assuming an unconcerned manner, the youth pushed on,

and as it was the evident intention of the Indians to intercept him, they were obliged to come upon a run. No hostile intentions were shown, and although Minnie was much alarmed, her conductor had no fears, as he did not doubt the efficacy of the chief's signet.

Looking behind he saw that those first espied had changed their course, and were now coming up rapidly in his rear. They were gaining fast, so that when the party in front had reached a position to intercept the fugitives, they were but a few paces behind. Seeing the position of affairs, Mark turned quickly, causing those whom he now faced to pause, likewise.

"Has the white man seen our chief, Ti-no-de-ga?" they asked, eying the twain somewhat suspiciously.

"I have seen him," Mark replied, very calmly, although he saw the savages whispering together, and regarding his companion with suspicious glances. "I saw him, and now he has gone to his camp."

"White man tell a lie!" flatly asserted the Indian who had not spoken before; a rough-looking fellow, with a single eye which gleamed most unpleasantly upon those before him.

At first the youth started at the accusation, and his hand moved toward his pistol; but he smothered his resentment with an effort, and pointed to the string of beads.

"Does the red brave doubt my words?" he asked, gazing the fellow full in the eye. "There is a token, given me by your chief, who bade me show it to his warriors. Not long since we ate together, and then he returned to his own people, as I have told you before."

"Where did Ti-no-de-ga stay last night?" the first speaker asked, showing by his manner that he partook of his companion's suspicions.

Mark related to them how he had found the chief mired in a slough, and extricated him with great difficulty, thus saving his life. How the chief had told his story, divided the cub with his white friends, and given the string of beads in evidence of his friendship.

The savages listened to the narration with occasional grunts, and when it was finished, beckoned the others to their side. A long consultation was held, and then one of the new-comers proceeded to question the scout.

"Why did the pale-face help the chief of the red-men?"

"Helped him as I would help you, in a like predicament," was the unhesitating answer. "Because I could not leave him there to die in such a manner."

"Pale-face lies!" was the stern rejoinder. "He does not help the red-man; he would kill him. He *has* killed Ti-no-de-ga, and taken his beads. The pale-face shall go with us, and if he has deceived us his lying heart shall be cut out, and given to the dogs!"

Truly, not a pleasant proposition! Mark had much faith in the chief, and even if not, he could not help himself, as other Indians were approaching the place. Making a virtue of necessity, he consented to accompany the savages, with apparent willingness.

"I will go," he said, "and you shall take me to your chief. If I have not told you the truth, you shall kill me. If I have, you shall give us horses to take us to the white man's fort."

The Indians expressed their satisfaction at these terms, and at once began to search his person for arms. These he allowed them to take; but when they would have bound him, he protested. The savages held a consultation, but it was short. The white man had no weapons, and they could do with him as seemed best. So his hands were bound before him, though Minnie, as a special mark of favor, was allowed to walk beside him, unconfined.

The maiden's heart was filled with the most dreadful forebodings. She knew that the savages were generally treacherous by nature, and she feared that they might fancy themselves at liberty to disregard the talismans they had treated so cavalierly. True, she had some faith in Ti-no-de-ga himself, if no sinister motive should chance to influence him; but the poor girl had many fears that they would not be allowed to return to the haunts of civilization. She had once been sold to the brutal Dan Rawlins. Was it not very likely that a few horses would buy her a second time, if the base man should make the offer? She feared as much; she could only pray that it might not be so.

They marched on for more than an hour, and when they neared the place of encampment were met by a larger party,

who halted those in charge of the prisoners, and a short consultation was held in the Indian tongue.

The result seemed to give joy to the savages, and the nature of it was speedily apparent to the prisoners themselves.

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSING SCENES.

DARK and angry glances were darted from the Indians to their prisoners, accompanied by looks and actions which Mark was utterly unable to comprehend. From what he could see, he felt certain that the party conducting him had learned of Ti-no-de-ga's return to camp. Certainly, all these movements did not indicate any good to himself and companion. He almost blamed himself that he had not fought and perished like a brave man, rather than have submitted to a half-willing captivity.

His feelings were not soothed when the two parties of savages united, and moved away into the wilderness again.

They proceeded nearly a mile, into a lonely and dismal part of the forest, and there they paused. There now appeared looks of delight among the infernal crew, and they capered about with strange gusto.

They had scarcely stopped when Minnie was bound hand and foot, and tied to a sapling. There could no longer be any doubt in regard to the intentions of the savages. Finding Ti-no-de-ga had returned, they had resolved to take the matter into their own hands, and brave his displeasure rather than be cheated of their victims!

Mark now began to strive for the freedom of his hands, but they had swollen so much that he could not get them free, as he had formerly done. Still he kicked and struggled desperately, though all to no purpose. He was forced back against the same sapling to which Minnie was bound, and very soon secured with withes, so that there was no possibility of getting away.

The savages now began to collect brushwood and fagots, yelling and dancing like so many demons as they piled the mass about their victims. It was but a short task where so many willing assistants were engaged, and in five minutes a number of the yelling scamps were applying fire to the pile.

The furious storm of the night before had rendered it far from an easy task to produce a general conflagration in the assembled pile. In places the bright flames would spring up for a moment, in token of what was to come, and then die down again, despite the efforts to keep them in life.

But at length the attempts of the persistent savages seemed about to be crowned with success. Ruddy flames rose in several places, spreading and increasing in strength, till the smoke, and heat, and steam began to be fearfully oppressive.

The savages were exulting hugely, taunting the scout, reviling his course, and denouncing him as a squaw, when suddenly a cry was raised which passed from mouth to mouth, producing a decided effect upon the yelling crew.

"Ti-no-de-ga is coming—our chief!"

Two or three of the most guilty slunk away, but they were espied, and fleet horsemen galloped off in pursuit of them.

The old chief, with a couple of attendants, rode hastily to the scene, and no sooner did his eyes rest upon the writhing captives, than his brow darkened with the most dreadful anger. With surprising alacrity the braves obeyed his order to release the victims, and himself sprung forward to assist in cutting their bonds.

Both the delivered ones would have pressed grateful thanks upon him, but they had no opportunity. Drawing a hatchet he strode among his followers, demanding to know who had dared to proceed thus against those whom a chief had marked as his friends. All present joined in clearing their own hands, declaring that those who had fled were the ringleaders.

This appeared evident, and when the runaways were brought in, they dared not deny their guilt. The foremost fell before a dreadful blow from the enraged chief's tomahawk, while the balance were sent to camp under a strong guard.

This done, the chief dismounted two of his attendants, and offered their horses to the late captives.

"You shall ride," he said, in a tone of kind regard very

different from his late manner toward his followers. "Me go with you and see you safe."

They thanked him for the offer, which they were but too well pleased to accept. When Mark had been provided with his pistols and knife, and upon a fine horse, with six attendant natives and their chief, all well armed and mounted, he felt a degree of confidence he had not experienced before, since leaving the burning cabin of George Eaton.

Ti-no-de-ga undertook to lead the way by the most direct route, and Mark rode beside him. Minnie followed just behind, while the braves, in scattering order, brought up the rear. They rode in silence, none of the party feeling much disposed to converse. Minnie had too many sorrowful recollections rising before her mind now that she was likely to return again to the place she had called home—alas! it could no longer be home to her! Not even to him she loved best of all on earth could she find heart to address many words. Mark, too, was busied with his thoughts; though they were not so sad as those of his companion.

Varied and trying as had been the experience through which these two loving hearts had been led, that repose and quiet for which their souls longed was not to be given them without another severe trial.

It was afternoon, and quite half the distance from the Indian camp to Fort Jackson had been passed, when the sound of horses' hoofs were suddenly heard behind them. The riders were not yet in sight, but they soon appeared, bearing down in hot haste, and giving vent to savage yells of delight when they saw the party in advance of them.

Minnie uttered a cry of horror, and pressed nearer her lover, for she recognized the foremost of the gang, despite his disguise, as none other than Dan Rawlins.

"Oh, Mark, Mark! We are lost! It is Dan Rawlins!" she exclaimed, wildly.

"I know who it is, dearest, and what his intentions are. But, he shall never have you; I will take his life with my own hand, first. It is no crime to rid the earth of such a monster!" Then turning to the chief, he said:

"My friend, those men would kill me, and take away my companion. I must fight them. Will your braves assist?"

The chief promised that they should do so if it were necessary, and by this time the pursuing party was so near that it was time to prepare for them.

Dan Rawlins had finally roused himself sufficiently to examine the cabin in which he lay, and very soon he was convinced that neither of his executioners had returned. What had detained them so long he did not know. He would look in upon his fair prisoner, perchance vent some of his whisky-brewed spite upon her, and then look up the recusant trio.

He opened the door. In such a small, bare apartment it needed no lengthy search to show him that she had gone! He was confounded, the more as he saw no possible way in which she could have escaped. The wind had closed the opening through which she had passed, so that her flight seemed almost miraculous.

Dan merely satisfied himself that she was gone, then turned away, and hastened toward the store-room. As he neared it, the splintered trunk filled him with a sort of apprehension, which was not diminished when he saw the trap still open. Very soon he satisfied himself of the whole sad truth, that his minions were all dead, and his other captive flown. Hours, too, had passed since he left. This was evident.

"If they get back to Jackson it's all up with me. They mustn't do it. I've played this game bold, and now I'll put on the finishin' stroke. That young chap has fooled me long anuff."

Gathering a half-dozen men, all that remained of the late daring band, he selected the swiftest horses from their stolen stores, and immediately set out, filled with the most murderous designs.

"Stop, thar; halt, or I'll fire into ye!" he sung out, when within fair distance of the pursued, raising his rifle.

Having nothing to gain by refusal, the party drew up, and wheeled their horses so as to face the coming villains. There were six of them, all reckless-looking fellows, soaked with whisky, and ready for murder.

"Perty bizness you're in, old red-skin," Dan began, addressing the chief, "sellin' me a gal, and then runnin' her off

on the very hosses I give for her! Now I'll take care of these two pale-faced runaways, and the rest of ye make tracks back ag'in, as fast as ye kin. I'll cook your greens for ye some other time."

"The white warrior is my friend," returned Ti-no-de-ga, keeping his eyes fixed sternly upon Dan. "Me never tell him lie!"

"So ye mean to fight for the pup, hey?"

There was a menace in the tones, and a general bustle of preparation among the base man's followers, which might well have alarmed a less resolute company.

"Come, you chap, ride out here and give yourself up! You hev played mighty sharp games over me, but it's too late in the day for that. Come, or I shall blaze away!"

Mark had seen Minnie placed in the rear of the braves, though not so far as to be in danger from a sudden dash in that direction. At the request of Dan he now rode forward a few paces. He felt that the issue must be decided by an appeal to arms, and he was determined that his hand should be steady, and his aim certain. He rode a pace in advance of Ti-no-de-ga, who held a musket in his hands, and there he stopped.

"Dan Rawlins," he said, calmly, "you are a fool to suppose I would go with you to my death. If the question is to be settled between us, let it be here."

Scarcely twenty yards intervened between the two. Dan had carefully leveled his rifle as the young man was speaking, and now he pulled the trigger. But, the weapon only snapped; it was damp.

"So you mean to shoot me, do you?" Mark demanded, raising a pistol in each hand.

His first intention was to fire very deliberately at the villain; but as the rogue clubbed his rifle and dashed forward, the youth waited for him. The whole band came with him, yelling fearfully, and the Indians met them with still more inhuman cries. Mark never moved his eyes from his aim, and when the desperado raised his weapon to strike, he pulled the trigger. A flash and report followed; Dan fell backward over the horse's flank to the earth. A second outlaw, whom Mark recognized as Tom Millen, was bearing down upon the

chief. It was evident that the latter was to have the worst of the meeting, as his musket missed fire, and the white man was upon him with clubbed rifle. To pour the contents of his second pistol into the villain's side was Mark's first impulse, and he followed it. Without a word the fellow rolled from his horse, and fell in a gasping pile to the ground.

The lesser Indians were not so fortunate in the encounter. At the first fire one of their number was killed, and though they wounded one of the charging party, it was not seriously enough to stop his progress.

The savages were not used to this kind of fighting, and gave way with alarming rapidity. Minnie was utterly unable to control her horse, which had taken fright at the discharge of firearms, and, at this point of the conflict, carried her directly into the midst of the four half-victorious outlaws.

"Hurrah, here's the gal!" shouted Jack Kingsley, as he seized her horse by the bridle, and checked its career. "Let's take her while we kin git her!"

Mark heard the words, and saw the maiden's dangerous situation. Turning his horse in that direction, he knocked aside, with his empty pistol, one who opposed him, and was near to Jack, when his horse was struck in the head by a bullet, and fell so quickly that he could scarce disengage himself.

"Ah, my chick! I have ye!" gloated Jack, as he leaned over and aimed a deadly blow at the struggling youth.

In a moment more the stroke would have fallen, but Ti-no-de-ga saw the peril of his brave friend, and sent a hatchet through the air with such precision that it knocked Jack from his horse, and he fell beside the man he would have slain.

"Blow me, Bill, if this ain't gittin' tew hot for me!" exclaimed one of those who remained, and turning his animal he galloped off, closely followed by the only comrade who was able to do so.

The one who had been knocked down by Morton's pistol also scrambled to his feet, and attempted to run; but two Indians set out in pursuit, returning soon with his scalp dangling from one of their belts.

The battle was fought—the victory won. After giving Minnie a few words of encouragement, Mark and the chief proceeded to survey the field.

Dan, being the most important, was the first object of their attention. He had been struck upon the side of the head by a bullet, and seriously stunned, though nothing more.

Tom Millen was dead, the ball having passed through his heart.

Jack Kingsley was only wounded and stunned. He and Dan were each placed upon a horse, and securely bound.

The body of the Indian who had been killed was placed beside a rock, that his companions might take it back with them when they should return. The carcasses of the two dead outlaws were placed one side, that the authorities at Fort Jackson might make such disposal of them as seemed best.

Mark was well pleased to find upon the earth a serviceable rifle—a weapon he had not handled for some time. While he was putting it in order, the party found a small stream near by, and from that they proceeded to quench their thirst. When this had been done they set forth again, leading the horses upon which the wounded outlaws had been placed.

They met with no more adventures.

Before night they reached the vicinity of the fort, and here Ti-no-de-ga would have left them, fearing the vengeance of the settlers. But, Mark represented to him that his appearance in a peaceful garb would be his protection, and when finally assured, the red warriors followed the young man's lead up to the gates of the fort.

Great was the excitement among the inhabitants when rumor began to circulate in regard to the approaching party. They had, at the first, given up the captives for lost, and the discovery of five dead bodies by some of the settlers who had dared to penetrate so far, had prepared them to give over Dan and Mark to the same fate. But when it was announced that Indians were bringing them back, and that Dan Rawlins had proved to be chief of the gang of horse-stealers, who were known far and wide through the country, the authorities hustled forth and took charge of the prisoners, using the necessary forms.

The inhabitants looked with jealous eyes upon the savages, but made no demonstrations, after being made aware of the service they had performed. Indeed, some of them relaxed

into a few expressions of kindness when a second party arrived, bringing Annette Eaton, the aunt, safe and unharmed.

Ti-no-de-ga bade farewell to his new-made friends, and rode away at the head of his warriors. They were allowed to depart unmolested, and some even went so far as to predict more happy times in the future. But, they waited long, and if living, are waiting still, for the era of universal peace. The chief and our hero never met again. The former grew blood-thirsty soon afterward, and attempted to surprise a party of emigrants. The tables were turned, and Ti-no-de-ga was killed.

Dan Rawlins was tried in due form, and we have the verdict of the jury, which was somewhat unique. It reads :

" *Guilty*, of a blamed many things he ought to be hung for!"

And he *was* hung; but not alone, for Jack Kingsley was allowed to keep him company.

Mark Morton and Minnie felt relieved from many unpleasant forebodings when these two notorious rascals were duly executed, and everybody rejoiced when they found that the band of horse-thieves was effectually broken up.

Figuratively speaking, our hero and heroine became the lions of the settlement. The varied adventures they had passed through were related and enlarged, till they almost rivaled the deeds of olden-time heroes and heroines; in fact, the habitual story-teller, who had made a hero of himself for years, upon every possible occasion, now spun his toughest yarns to the credit of Mark Morton.

We need not say that the lovers were married in due time, lived happy lives, and did their part toward peopling the vast regions of the far west—because, you know, dear reader, that if this had not been the case, our story being imperfect would never have been written.

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